

Games People Play: Identity and Relationships in an Online Role-Playing Game

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by

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Everquest: a brief introduction.....	1
What makes Everquest attractive?	5
Literature Review.....	7
Mainstream views on the internet and Everquest	7
Social constructionist views.....	13
Negotiating the hyperreal.....	19
Psychodynamic views.....	29
Fantasy and projection in an interpersonal realm	35
Phenomenological and cyborg views.....	37
Room for more study	47
Method	50
Research model	51
Preliminary self-analysis.....	54
Method for this study	57
Questions that guided analysis.....	61
Data Presentation and Analysis	63
N interview analysis.....	64
Introduction to the game	64
The changing game landscape	65
Relatedness in Everquest	73
Managing interactions across media.....	78
Limitations of his character	82
Game log.....	85
My experience of the interview	86
M interview analysis.....	87
Being challenged in-game.....	87
Strengths of his character.....	90
Interactions with others in-game and offline	93
Relatedness in Everquest	95
The dialogue between player and character.....	98
Game log.....	100
My experience of the interview	101
D interview analysis.....	102
Relatedness in Everquest	102
Impact of Everquest on D's offline life	106
Everquest as soft addiction	109
The cost of playing and the cost of quitting.....	113
The meeting of Everquest and 'real life'	114
Other experiences of the game and his character.....	118
Game log.....	122
My experience of the interview	123

Across-interview analysis	123
Belonging to a community – online and off	124
The quality of relationships in Everquest	126
Points of contact – online and offline relationships.....	129
Personal investments.....	131
Summary	134
Discussion.....	135
Community in Everquest	137
Comparing Everquest to offline communities	138
Limits and ambivalence in Everquest relationships.....	140
Limits and ambivalence, online and off.....	142
Everquest as separate social reality.....	145
Identity in Everquest.....	147
Tools, prosthesis, cyborgs – the integration of Everquest experience.....	147
Many or few identifications?	149
Which identifications to choose?	151
Questions for further research and limitations of this study.....	158
Appendix 1: Everquest concepts and purpose of the game	165
Appendix 2: Flowchart of contact with participants.....	169
Appendix 3: Consent Form.....	170
Appendix 4: Interview guide	171
Appendix 5: Initial reflection: my responses to interview questions.....	172
Appendix 6: Concerning game logs.....	176
Appendix 7: N interview.....	179
Appendix 8: M interview	194
Appendix 9: D interview.....	210
Works Cited	223

Introduction

Chapter 1

I had never seen my friend Peleg. However, I knew he was kind, loyal, and funny. After having known him for some time as a barbarian shaman in a fantasy online world, I came to know him as a human resident of Colorado. I learned what kind of work he did, that he was married with two children. I discovered some of his personal likes and dislikes, and he learned the same sorts of things about me. We shared good and bad news, offered congratulations and support. The internet allowed me to communicate and form a relationship, through the circuitry of a keyboard and a monitor, with someone whose face, voice, and body I never knew. I met Peleg through an online game called Everquest, one of multitude formats through which people can connect with each other through the internet.

Everquest: a brief introduction

Everquest is one of a newer breed of video games, called massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs. Players create a character, such as a wizard, warrior, or cleric of various fantasy races to interact in a fantasy world that is much like offline role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and inspired by books such as *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2004). To play these games, players log on to internet servers to connect with hundreds, or even thousands, of other players. Whereas in older video games a player moved through an imaginary world in which every creature with

whom he or she interacted was actually part of the computer program, in Everquest players interact in a fantasy world populated by other people who are also playing the game.

The format of Everquest is something in between a traditional video game and older MUDs (multi-user dungeons). MUDs were entirely text-based formats, like today's chat rooms. While MUD users used text to create pieces of their virtual world, as in "Jenn hands her reader a cookie," there is no representation of images in these contexts, just as you cannot see (unless you imagine) the cookie I was offering you. MUDders used the same textual descriptions to create their online personas, giving them physical descriptions and facial expressions and using text to speak through these characters. MUDs often used different sorts of text to differentiate between words that described a thing or a character's actions and words spoken through a character. Players used text commands to differentiate between the possible kinds of text, which might make the words appear on other player's screens in different colors, or in different formats. For example, to indicate that my character is doing something, I might type:

/smiles understandingly

or

/wonders what she will have for breakfast

which might appear on other player's screens as:

Jenn smiles understandingly.

Jenn wonders what she will have for breakfast.

To speak through a character, one might type:

Are you confused?

Which might appear in the MUD as:

Jenn asks: "Are you confused?"

MUD users understood the former kind of text as an "emote"; these expressed the emotion of the character, whereas the latter indicated words that were attributed to the character, as if he or she had spoken them. In some cases, color or font further differentiated these threads of text.

MUDs also allowed for text to be public or private, as speech may be. In a crowded room, I can shout so that everyone can hear me, I may carry on a conversation with the group of people near me, or I may whisper quietly to someone so that only she can hear. Text in MUDs allowed for the same choices. MUDs had a certain geography or spatiality. Though anyone in a MUD is technically as close or as far away as anyone else in cyberspace, MUDs were often broken up into areas through which characters could travel. In moving through the MUD world, I could use text to speak so that only people close to me in the MUD geography could hear, shout to everyone in a broader area, or speak privately to a particular person, wherever he or she was in the MUD world.

Despite the limitations of this purely text-based medium, MUDders created vibrant worlds and characters in which they could become very invested. Most of the research done on heavy internet use, online identity, and online interactions has focused on MUD users. In a sense, MUDs were the original MMORPGs, used mostly by college students at a time when internet connections were less prevalent in homes and offices than on college campuses.

Everquest contains all the textual possibilities of MUDs, but adds visual representations. In addition to a text window (like a word-processing program in a

window on your computer desktop) the player interacts with visual representations of other players and of places and creatures who are part of the computer program. In creating a new character in Everquest, players need not rely only on text to establish identity; they may customize the character's face, eye and hair color, even clothing. The ability to emote is also expanded by the visual component of Everquest; if I type:

/dance

The text emote "Jenn stands on her tiptoes and does a dance of joy!" appears on my screen and for those nearby me, and the image of my character actually dances. These methods for representing and animating one's online persona allows for a different experience of self and other than a purely text-based format would.

Playing Everquest is a combination of interacting with other players and with characters or monsters that are run by the game itself, not the representation of other players. Players often must work together to travel the Everquest world, fight monsters, and perform quests. As in traditional role-playing games, players increase in power and abilities as they perform more quests and kill more monsters. The game encourages player cooperation, and players who enjoy each other's company often join together to create "guilds." Guilds have names for themselves, similar to the Knights of the Round Table, which appear above the characters' images, marking them as members. They also may use a special type of text chat that is viewable only by other members of the guild, allowing them to communicate with the whole group no matter what their location is within the Everquest world. They may collaborate to accomplish in-game tasks, or they might simply chat with one another while they go about their business separately. Outside of Everquest, guild members often create websites and message boards for

communicating while not playing the game. Like any community, guilds differ in their rules and traditions; some guilds forbid discussion of personal, or “real life” news in the guild, while others are very open with their out-of-game lives. Regardless of their style of interaction, guilds are often the source and setting for online relationships with others and an arena for the development of an online self.¹

What makes Everquest attractive?

The popularity of Everquest has a significance outside of its success as a computer game. Players devote so much time to the game, are so invested in it, that one may begin to wonder about the psychological dynamics and implications involved. As internet connections become ubiquitous in homes and schools, more and more people are engaging in all kinds of online social interactions, some so much so that their time for face-to-face interactions is diminished. Many are beginning to wonder about the implications of internet use on our lives: given the potential for anonymity and masquerade online, how do we form an identity online? Do Everquest players behave very differently, or make different identifications than they would normally offline? How are online relationships different from offline ones? What makes online interactions so attractive that people will sacrifice time for face-to-face interactions for them? Computer-mediated identities and relationships must, by necessity be different in quality from our face-to-face identities and relationships; we might wonder about how these differences influence our understanding of face-to-face identity and relationships. Stuart Hall points out, “how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of

¹ For more information about the purpose and mechanics of Everquest, please see Appendix 1: Everquest Concepts and Purpose.

representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role” (1996, p.443). Understanding how and why people create online selves who are involved in online relationships may help us understand something about what these concepts mean for us today, online and off. Rather than a radical departure from our everyday ways of interacting, perhaps the particular characteristics of internet communication reflect them in some ways.

Many people now spend significant amounts of their leisure time online. In Everquest particularly, studies suggest that the average player spends 20-24 hours per week playing the game (Yee, 2001, p.7,12). Many players spend even more time online visiting related websites and online message boards. Such a schedule often leaves little time for socialization outside of the game. About one-third of respondents to an online survey of Everquest players agreed that their “real life” relationships have suffered because of Everquest. (Yee, p.29). Online newsgroups formed specifically for those who feel they have “lost” a significant other to the game, such as the widely subscribed “Everquest Widows” group, attest to the commonality and seriousness of the phenomenon. How are we to understand such Everquest players, whose offline relationships suffer while their online life flourishes? What makes Everquest so attractive?

Literature Review

Chapter 2

Mainstream views on the internet and Everquest

Common perception paints heavy internet users as socially inept and isolated, thrilled by the anonymity the medium offers and the possibility of “escaping” from their otherwise impoverished lives. They are deceitful in their presentation as they attempt to become anything other than themselves. Many people imagine that the relationships formed online are less “real” than those formed face-to-face, as a relationship formed between two facades, two “fake” identities pretending to interact as real people do. They see online communication as inherently distancing and deceptive, as lacking the authenticity that only physical presence can bring.

In fact, this view of heavy internet users is not without support in the literature. Earlier writing on the psychology of the internet, as well as more recent work from advocates of an “Internet Addiction” diagnosis provides support for just such a formulation. Howard Rheingold, one of the earlier writers on internet relationships, was somewhat mixed in his assessment of the psychological implications of computer-mediated relationships. He pointed to the work of Amy Bruckman, who noted that it is “tempting but dangerous to impose value judgments on MUD players who are happy with how they are spending their time” (1992, p.32). However, Rheingold questioned the authenticity of online relationships when he warned that “people who communicate via computer networks definitely need to learn about the dangers of mistaking messages on computer screens for fully authentic human relationships” (2000, p.355). While

Rheingold, himself an active participant on an early MUD known as the WELL, was weary of criticizing people who spend much of their time interacting online, he saw inherent obstacles to “authentic” relating via the internet. “CMC [computer-mediated-communication] is a way to connect with another human being,” he wrote, “but the authenticity of human relationships is always in question in cyberspace, because of the masking and distancing of the medium, in a way that is not in question in real life” (p.152). People online are looking for connection, Rheingold argued, but what they find is always something anonymous, intangible, and not quite real; their efforts at connection are plagued by deception and distance, inherent in the medium. For Rheingold, even if I strive to communicate as honestly as possible online, the “real me” would not come across as if I were speaking to someone next to me. While Rheingold was skeptical of online relationships, he was vehemently opposed to trying on different identities online, as players in online role-playing games such as Everquest are encouraged by the medium to do. He articulated the fears of many who would avoid internet relationships because of the uncertainty of online identities when he wrote, “the possibility of an electronic impostor invading people’s most intimate lives is inherent in the technology” (p.169). The possibilities for representing oneself differently are rife on the internet, and Rheingold warned us to beware of wolves in sheep’s text.

Kimberly Young, a major proponent of using an addiction model to understand “pathological internet use (PIU),” also pointed to the unreality of relationships formed online and described the process as “almost like watching a soap opera and thinking of the characters as real people” (1997, p.4). Young (1996, 1997), in her research on heavy internet use, discovered that heavy internet users, those she classifies as “dependents,”

most often use synchronous forms of communication to “meet, socialize, and exchange ideas with new people” (1997, p.3). Young argued that what draws most “dependents” to the internet is “social support, sexual fulfillment, and creating a persona” (p.3). She supported the notion that the heavy internet user is typically isolated and socially awkward offline, and posited that the formation of online relationships and communities “creates a group dynamic of social support to answer a deep and compelling need in people whose lives are interpersonally impoverished” (p.3). While she briefly considered the possibility that disconnection is becoming a prevalent state of affairs in our society, in general her portrayal of heavy internet users focused on those with poor social skills who are able to “escape” their unfulfilling life through online interaction.

One limitation of Young and Rheingold’s understanding of the online relating is the assumption that ideally, online relationships would (or should) approximate offline ones: that offline interactions are the standard against which online ones should be measured. Even if we were to assume that online relationships are mostly similar to offline ones, they also assume that the socially dangerous or inept could re-create themselves online to penetrate a community that is usually unavailable to them. This assumption seems to forget common wisdom about the ineffectiveness of the geographical cure and assumes that we are not limited in the identifications we can take up. We will return to this point later in the literature, but also in examining the data from this study. Though mainstream theorists are concerned with the internet in general, this study offers an opportunity to examine in detail the particular case of Everquest players, how they perceive the contours between their in-game and offline identifications, and their perception of the comparison between in-game and face-to-face interactions. Are

these players seeking escape, an approximation of a more satisfying offline life, or something else?

Also of particular interest in Young's (1996, 1997) argument was her understanding of the creation of an online persona. While Rheingold (2000) warned mostly against willful deceit, Young (1997) highlighted the potential for the emergence of the unconscious in the creation of online personas. Internet "dependents," she argued, "reinvent" themselves online "to fulfill an unmet need" (p.5). The freedom and anonymity of internet communication, she wrote, "allows one to reconstruct an 'ideal self' in place of a poor self-concept" (p.5). She noted reports from internet users of being able to bring out, in their internet personas, "parts of themselves which have been submerged," and construed this unlocking of potential selves as a return of the repressed (1997, p.5). These repressed aspects of self can be difficult to integrate into everyday life, she warned, and equally difficult to "submerge back into the unconscious" (p.6), but serve to "heighten their experience of recognition and power" online (p.7). The implication is that heavy internet users are socially isolated and awkward offline, and their online personas allow them to express regressive aggressive and sexual drives that have no outlet in their offline lives in the hope of finding respect and recognition. She concluded that the "mood states" achieved in online interaction, such as "reduced loneliness, improved self-esteem, and euphoria" act as positive reinforcement for internet use and that the internet provides heavy users with a "temporary support fix" (p.7). These benefits of heavy internet use, however, interfere with "proper socialization of real life relationships" (p.7).

Young's assertion that internet interaction can be a catalyst for the return of the repressed paints online interaction as very dangerous, indeed, and, if true, could lead to serious consequences for players' offline lives. This claim helps to draw internet use in the same light as other addictive and destructive activities such as substance abuse and compulsive gambling – most of which are so commonly recognized as dangerous that they are regulated by the government! Though Young is not writing particularly about Everquest, players of the game commonly refer to it as addicting. It is not so clear, however, that internet users in general or Everquest players in particular feel they have unlocked sexual or aggressive drives online that they are unprepared to manage in their offline lives. This study could help shed some light on the issue by exploring the participants particular reactions to their Everquest experiences.

A pair of studies on new internet users spoke to Young's hypothesis that the socially isolated or awkward use the internet to increase their rewarding social contacts. Kraut et al. (1998, 2002) gave families in Pittsburgh internet access and tracked changes in social involvement, mood, and stress levels. Though they noted that the family members used the internet primarily to correspond with others (through email, MUDS, or message boards, as opposed to surfing the world wide web), after one to two years of internet use, they found that "greater use of the Internet was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people's local social networks, with increases in loneliness" (1998, p.1032). Greater internet use was also associated with increases in depression, and nonsignificant decreases in distant social circle, social support, and nonsignificant increases in stress (p.1032). The researchers postulated that, while the

subjects used the internet to try to connect with others, they may have supplanted stronger offline relationships with weaker online ones. This initial study seemed to indicate that, even if people used the internet to try to attain more social contact, they actually risked becoming more lonely and isolated.

Kraut and colleagues returned to their paradoxical findings three years later in a follow-up study. Re-assessing the same subjects, who now had been using the internet for several years, they found that “the main effects of Internet use on...measures of social involvement were generally positive” and that “participants who used the internet more had larger increases in the sizes of their local social circle...and distant social circle...and their face-to-face interaction with friends and family increased” (2002, p.61). In fact, the only negative impact on well-being that remained across both studies was an increase in stress with increased internet use (p.67). They hypothesized that the atmosphere of the internet, which was becoming much more prevalent in homes and schools at the time of their follow-up, might account for the different findings. The researchers also noticed, however, that “internet use was associated with better outcomes for extraverts and worse outcomes for introverts,” supporting a “rich get richer” hypothesis (p.64). People who began the study with better social skills, they supposed, were better able to use those skills online to add to their social support network, while those who had more interpersonal difficulties offline were less able to take advantage of the social opportunities the internet offered. While Kraut and colleagues did not argue that the socially impoverished use the internet more, their findings did suggest that they would tend to be less successful than the socially skilled in meeting relational needs through internet use.

Young's classificatory system for identifying those with Pathological Internet Use or internet addiction was based on DSM criteria for Pathological Gambling (Young, 1996, 1997). She and others who have adopted these criteria have been criticized on this point for "focusing on tangentially-related aspects of some syndromes that have *nothing* to do with communicating with people or gathering information" (Rheingold, 2000, p.358). For example, Rheingold (2000) might argue that it is problematic to compare the way a heavy internet user looks forward to chatting with an online friend to the way an alcoholic looks forward to his next drink. A different criticism could be leveled at Young and other thinkers who saw the formation of an online persona and online interactions as regressive, deceptive, or somehow less than real. These thinkers assumed our identity in face-to-face interactions is stable and without orchestration, whereas a social constructionist view of the self would argue that neither of these is the case.

Social constructionist views

Thinkers such as Baudrillard (1983, 1994), Kenneth Gergen (2000), and Don Ihde (2002) looked to the ways that the internet and other modern technologies have changed our sense of self, such that the distinction between a "real" offline self and a "virtual" online self become blurred, even meaningless. Rheingold (2000) pointed to the internet as "the latest phase in a long sequence of mental changes brought about by the invention and widespread use of symbolic tools" (p.150). He found the beginning of this technological change in the printing press, which allowed knowledge to be shared by many people who might have never met. Later communication and transportation advances began to erase the time and space that had separated distant people (p.150). So, for example, I can nullify the distance between myself and a friend in Japan by picking

up the phone or writing an email, or I may erase the time that separates me from a long dead author by opening a book or watching a movie. Rheingold noted, “the latest computer-mediated communications media seem to dissolve boundaries of *identity* as well” (p.151, italics original).

One could say these symbolic technologies simulated the presence of those who were geographically or temporally distant. Baudrillard, however, posited that the current state of simulation is “no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept...it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1994, p. 1). While Rheingold pointed out that symbolic technologies have forced us to re-evaluate our conception of self and relatedness, we have seen him argue that the internet has the power to deceive, that some might create false selves online (2000, p.169). For Baudrillard, however, the simulacrum of the ‘false’ internet identity makes null the distinction between the internet self and any ‘real’ self to which it is meant to refer. He wrote that in the system of simulation, the simulacrum takes on a life of its own that does not require a real referent: “the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard, 1994, pp.5-6).

Baudrillard argued that in this context of simulation, the simulacra obliterate the real; when, in an effort to preserve a treasured French archeological site, visitors are prevented from entering the actual caves, but are permitted to tour identical caves constructed yards away, “the duplication suffices to render both artificial” (1994, p.9). Baudrillard wrote that, unless some memory of the significance of the original caves were

stamped on our collective minds, to future generations they will be indistinguishable (p.9). In the same vein, Idhe (2002, pp.129-30) wrote of the use of flight simulators both for personal entertainment and for an annual test for pilots. The simulation is real for the pilot in the sense that he or she risks losing the right to fly if he or she performs poorly, but only context separates the pilot's experience from the teenager's in the arcade. While flight simulators may have been created to be 'just like flying,' for younger generations, learning to fly (or more commonly, drive) might be experienced as 'just like a game.' We might also guess that for a younger generation of video game players, the shift between character and player will become more and more fluid.

The boundary between a flight simulator and "real" flight is blurred by the flight simulation test for pilots, and Baudrillard (1981) argued that the difference between the real and simulation is dissolving everywhere; that our society is making "the passage from a *metallurgic* into a *semiurgic* society" (p.185). Best and Kellner (1991) explained that this transition from metallurgic to semiurgic describes the process by which "computerization, information processing, media, cybernetic control systems, and the organization of society according to simulation codes and models replace production as the organizing principle of society" (p.118). Baudrillard (1994) argued that in such a society, "never again will the real have the chance to produce itself" (p.2). Rather, "models and codes become the primary determinants of social experience" as the hyperreal becomes more real than the real in that "the real is produced according to a model" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.119). For example, Best and Kellner (1991) pointed to the ideal homes, clothes, relationships, sex, and lifestyles portrayed in various media against which we measure our own. Technology enables the dissemination of many

messages with which we might structure our experience, and Baudrillard argued that this works to “saturate the social field” and that “meaning and messages flatten each other out in a neutralized flow of information, entertainment, advertising, and politics” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.121). For example, Baudrillard (1994) said about television that it “cools and neutralizes the meaning and the energy of events” (p.53).

Gergen (2000) also noted the dramatic increase of models for understanding experience brought about by certain technology, and argued, similarly to Baudrillard, that they contribute to a social saturation, or “a *populating of the self*, the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being” (2000, p.69, italics original). Technology such as the internet, and particularly role-playing games such as Everquest provide access to many examples of possible ways of playing each role from which one may pick and choose to create one’s own personal, situational identity. The distinction between the “real me” and the role I portray becomes blurred in a society where “seeming” is as good as “being.” Gergen and Baudrillard both noted, as an effect of this social saturation of realer-than-real models, the collapse of boundaries between politics and entertainment. Best and Kellner (1991) explained the application of hyperreality to political campaigns, “where image is more important than substance, and political campaigns have become increasingly dependent on media advisors...who have transformed politics into image contests” (p.120). Gergen (2000) wrote about the analogous shift in personal image management: “If we learn that ‘seeming’ rather than ‘being’ enables one to attain the presidency,” he explained, “then marketing one’s personality becomes the most reasonable orientation to daily life” (p.151).

Both Baudrillard and Gergen suggested that, with the rapid spread via technology of possible models for reality and the implosion of boundaries of meaning (between the real and simulation, news and entertainment, war and media coverage of war, for example), there is potential for one to take up, play with, and combine different identifications. Baudrillard imagined a “‘fractal multiplication of body images’ in which individuals can combine any number of models into a new body that erases previous divisions of race, class, gender, or specific looks” and gave as his example Michael Jackson, who blurs distinctions between black and white, male and female (Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 137). Gergen (2000) argued a similar point, regarding our ability to choose from various identifications as the situation demands, incorporating pieces of the ideals presented to us via all kinds of media. He described this kind of constructed identity as the “pastiche personality,” and explained that “the pastiche personality is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation” (p.150).

Here, however, Baudrillard and Gergen diverge. Gergen (2000) described the movement of the individual from a modernist, essentialist conception of self to a pastiche personality as “a form of liberation from essence” in which one “learns to derive joy from the many forms of self-expression now permitted” (p.147). For him, the proliferation of possible identities and the collapse of boundaries between the real and simulation lead to a joyful play of identification. For Baudrillard, however, this collapse of meaning and structuring of experience by the hyperreal leads to the end of possibilities. We have already heard his argument that television “cools and neutralizes the meaning and energy of events” (1994, p.53). For example, Baudrillard claimed that the Gulf War did not

happen, meaning, in part, that “war can become a ‘pure media event’ – where all possibilities are exhausted in advance, both by ‘official’ and media strategists” (Hegarty, 2004, p.62). This exhaustion of possibilities in advance by the media acts as a form of “deterrence” against the actual war (p.62). Baudrillard similarly argued that this media saturation would lead to the end of history altogether, leaving only a “futureless future in which no decisive event can await us, because all is finished, perfected, and doomed to infinite repetition” (Best and Kellner, 1991, p.134). While we are still free to play with identifications, and in fact perhaps “all we can do is to assemble the fractal pieces of our culture and proceed to its extremities,” (p.137) for Baudrillard this is not a joyful play, as with Gergen, but a sort of sterile, forced repetition of possibilities that have already been played out.

Certainly, the internet is one means of generating hyperreality, or of saturating the self, and Everquest players’ experiences would seem to be particularly relevant to social constructionist thought. Given the opportunity to create and identify with an Everquest character, how do players navigate the realm of hyperreality? The types of characters they are given to choose from seem to capture the cultural extremities to which Baudrillard refers; they are realer than real, better than the real thing. Players choose from a cast of storybook character classes with idealized computerized images and can use these characters to take part in epic battles and quests. Given this opportunity, do players take part in a joyful play of identity, taking up and casting off identifications (and characters) at will, as Gergen might expect? Does their experience in Everquest become an act of repetition, in which the opportunity to play out a multitude of possibilities becomes a deterrence to any of them, in the sense of Baudrillard? In this case, might we

expect a collapse of the boundaries between Everquest character and player, in which the player essentially creates him or herself as a character, or would the player be more likely to take on identifications that erase boundaries, like Baudrillard's example of Michael Jackson?

However the player chooses to dialogue with his or her character and the game of Everquest, these social constructionist thinkers provide a very different perspective from more mainstream thinkers; whereas writers like Young (1996, 1997) saw online personas as a regressive means to gain recognition and power which is lacking in the dependent's offline life, writers like Gergen (2000) asserted that this creation of situation-appropriate selves is part of daily life as well: "each movement of the body, seemingly private and spontaneous, is orchestrated for social effect. In the modernist attempt at machinelike efficacy, claims to sincerity evaporate" (2000, p.149). In order to succeed in our various daily roles, we must shift between different possible ways of being and relating. While a modernist perspective might see this shifting between possible selves as manipulative or deceitful, from a social constructionist view the concept of the 'one true self' is meaningless.

Negotiating the hyperreal

While Baudrillard and Gergen's writing focused on the impact of media in general and mainstream writers like Young and Rheingold were concerned with the internet as a whole, both are relevant to the study of Everquest particularly and the process of creating a character, representing oneself in the game, and relating to other characters. Online environments like Everquest juxtapose identity play and relationship formation – one is encouraged to identify with fantasized characters and also to come into

relationships with other players. This mixture of potentially multiple fantasy selves and relationships with others is exactly what is alternately of concern to or inspiring to the writers mentioned so far. What sort of relationships do Everquest players form, and how might they differ from face-to-face relationships? Do online experiences of relating inform offline ones, or vice versa? How do players negotiate the shift between Everquest and offline life?

Online selves do require some attention to impression management, as users must put into words that which might be seen or enacted otherwise, and thus it is possible to present differently than one might in face-to-face interaction. McRae (1997), in her explorations of online embodiment, wrote, “when projected into virtuality, ‘mind,’ ‘body,’ and ‘self’ all become consciously manufactured constructs through which individuals interact with each other” (p.75). This quality of cyberspace inspired early writers to view cyberspace as a dangerous world of deception in which no one is as he or she seems. Sherry Turkle (1997), on the other hand, wrote, “the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (p.180). Like Gergen, Turkle noted that a conscious shifting of roles is part of our daily lives; we display certain aspects of our personalities and obscure others as we take on or drop identifications across situations.

If the internet as a whole is such a “social laboratory,” Everquest is even more so; players all create a character that is different from their everyday lives. In Everquest, questions of identification and dialogue between player and fantasized character come front and center in that character creation is the necessary first step for entering the game. What differentiates the internet in general and Everquest in particular from the conscious

social construction of personae in daily life is the almost limitless possibilities it opens for identity play. This freedom to choose very disparate roles is exactly what made Young (1996, 1997) and Rheingold (2000) suspicious of online interactions. From a social constructionist viewpoint, however, our socially enacted selves are the only ones we have. Gergen (2000) wrote, for example, “for the pastiche personality, there is no self outside that which can be constructed within a social context” (2000, p.154). Similarly, “as social relationships become opportunities for enactment, the boundary between the real and the presented self – between substance and style – is erased” (p.155).

Baudrillard, as we have seen, similarly argued that, in our current culture we have a great deal of freedom to dissolve traditional boundaries of identification. Baudrillard has been criticized, however, for failing to recognize the ways we are constrained in identification even in our semiurgic society; in particular reference to Baudrillard’s reference to Michael Jackson as embodying the freedom Americans have to re-create themselves and transcend boundaries, Best and Kellner (1991) wrote, “the fact of racial difference...remains a salient feature of contemporary US society. Most blacks do not achieve the media fame and wealth of a Michael Jackson and cannot easily mix racial and sexual features into new configurations” (p.139). While it seems that racial difference may also remain salient in the world of Everquest (characters who appeared black were certainly not equally represented with light-skinned characters, and I often heard dark elves, who have blue skin, referred to in-game as “darkies”) certainly our identities may shift and change much more easily in Everquest than in offline life. Idhe (2002) remarked on the easy shifting of perspectives within video games; one can play a flight simulator from the pilot’s perspective, or from an impossible third-person perspective,

watching oneself as a “quasi-object” (p.82). “There is an easy switching of perspectives, made equivalent and thus only quasi-embodied in the game,” he wrote (p.82). The same easy changing of perspectives is possible in many video games, Everquest included, and it highlights the temporary and ambivalent nature of our identifications with online selves. Idhe wrote that for this reason “VR bodies are thin and never attain the thickness of flesh” (p.15). The option to take on a third-person perspective in some “quasi-out-there location” allows the video game player to take “the self-position as quasi-other” (p.85), located neither in nor completely out of the field of play. The Everquest player can similarly take part in a play of identifications - being many different selves, or enjoy a sort of erasure of the self and watch from an ‘outside’ vantage.

The shifting line between the real and the virtual or hyperreal, “substance and style” in terms of relationships that are formed online, particularly as part of a game like MUDs or Everquest, is a fascinating and complex issue. Mizuko Ito (1997) wrote, “often MUD users...use the category of “real life” as a denaturalized category to refer to existence that is not computationally contingent.... so while these categories of “real life” versus “the game” are ubiquitous oppositional categories within MUD conversation, what counts as real is hotly contested” (pp.93-4). We have heard Baudrillard’s argument that the boundary between the real and the hyperreal is everywhere dissolving, and for Everquest players this is certainly a difficult struggle. In fact, several Everquest players in one study (Yee 2001) struggled with the concepts of “real” or “virtual” in describing their in-game experiences. For example, one player, comparing friends made in Everquest to real life (RL) friends wrote,

For the most part, however, I don’t see any difference between in-game vs. so called “real life.” If I’ve made friends with someone Out of Character [a mode of

chat in Everquest] while in-game...then that friendship is RL. Period. To think otherwise would be to believe there is such a thing as “Virtual Friends,” and that, I don’t believe in. (Yee, 2002, p.10)

Players who were asked to “comment on whether nothing pertaining to the real world can be learned from the game because it is all fake” (Yee, 2001, p.59) responded passionately. One who identified as a 30-year-old male wrote:

The game is fake of course. We’re only looking at computer screens and pixels. But the people playing it are real. With real feelings, emotions, and desires. The actions I do and things I say make a difference as people remember and form opinions about myself. Once a high level character cast a bunch of super buff [beneficial] spells on me and said “soandso said you were a really nice person” and I had never met her before. I thanked her and felt good. (p.59)

Both of these Everquest players found some in-game recognition of self or others that felt real. The former player made no distinctions between friends made online and off; her relationship to them was the same. The latter player “felt good” upon getting a compliment from the stranger, and was happy to think of himself as a “really nice person.” But did he feel like *he* was a “really nice person,” or was the compliment for *his character*? Was the pride he felt in reaction to this compliment a pride in creating a character that was convincingly “really nice,” or did he feel proud for being “a really nice person”? Here the line between the virtual world and the “real world” becomes especially blurry, and here, in Everquest, is an opportunity to understand more about the movement from real to hyperreal as experienced by the players.

We have already noted that an Everquest player must invest him or herself in the process of portraying an online character in order to achieve a sense of telepresence. We have also considered the potential for Everquest to serve as an “identity lab” in which we may try out various personae that may or may not reflect our habitual ways of being in face-to-face contexts. When I relate to someone else online, who is the I that is doing the

relating? Annette Markham, (1998) studying chat room participants, reported the assertion from an online interviewee that he is the same person, online or off (p.134).

This particularly well-read interviewee described himself:

Unrepentant real-lifer. If you read something like Sherry Turkle's book 'Life on the Screen' you'll see the argument that a lot of people are really different people online from what they are in RL, and that this is an important part of the totality of their being.

On the other hand...I'm just me, really or virtually. (p.134)

This user did not seem to disagree that his virtual self was an important part of the totality of his being, but said that he was not different from his online self. Of course, the role of character creation in chat rooms differs from character creation in Everquest; this study might provide some insight into the ways in which Everquest players experience a collapse of the boundaries between character and player, such that they might be "just me, really or virtually."

Participants in other studies admitted that they were participating in an identity lab online, and the relationship between their online and offline selves varied. Many MUD players, speaking to Sherry Turkle (1997), reported that, though they put on a slightly different persona for online play, they felt that this online self was a central, though perhaps underexpressed, part of their offline self. Turkle (1997) presented a twenty-six-year-old woman who said, "I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than one self on MUDs, I feel more like 'myself' when I'm MUDing" (p.185).

This person seems to embody Gergen's notion of the pastiche personality: reveling in the multiple possibilities for self-expression. Turkle presented another player, about to meet

an online lover face-to-face, who worried that she would not be as desirable as her online self:

I didn't exactly lie to him about anything specific, but I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me. (p. 179)

This woman struggled with expressing the relationship between her online and offline selves; the online self felt “more real” in some ways, but she seemed to worry that she had lied somehow in her presentation of herself – that meeting her in person will be like meeting someone else. The sense that the online self is somehow a more real, or better version of the offline self is not uncommon. Ito (1997) described another such case of the MUD persona being a “partial reembodiment” of an admired part of the offline self (p.96). He presented a woman, Melissa, who discussed her relationship to her online character, Tenar: “‘I don't bring Melissa into the game, but I bring Tenar back with me.’ In other words, Melissa is invisible from the point of view of Tenar, but Melissa sees Tenar as a more positive self-image that animates her real life” (p.96). In these cases the online and offline selves are undoubtedly closely connected, but she described the movement of identification and repudiation of identity as one-way only – she did not feel that her offline roles informed her online ones.

Turkle presented several cases in which online experiences did help transform or change offline ones. She described a young woman, Julee, who “believes the stereotypes. Her role-playing is psychologically constructive. She uses it to engage with some of the most important issues in her life and to reach new emotional resolutions” (1997, p.188). Julee used role-play in gaming to act out dynamics that were happening in her offline life and used the game as a way to work out possible ways of relating in “real life.” Turkle

explained that “role-playing games [such as some MUDs and Everquest] can serve in this evocative capacity because they stand betwixt and between the unreal and the real; they are a game and something more” (p.188).

Cases like Julee’s suggest that, for at least some online, their online persona is very closely related to their offline personae – so much so that change or growth in one can facilitate change in the other. Of the transformation that can happen between the online and offline selves, Turkle wrote “people don’t just become who they play, they play who they are or who they want to be or who they don’t want to be. Players sometimes talk about their real selves as a composite of their characters and sometimes talk about their screen personae as means for working on the RL lives” (1997, p.192).

The identity play that MUDs or Everquest allow is also something more than play. Turkle wrote about her subjects who grew through their online experiences as nurturing themselves “in displacement” (p.202) and argued that the internet provides what Erik Erikson called a “psychosocial moratorium” (p.203). The adolescent psychosocial moratorium, which Turkle argued is less available in our society now, is a period for trying out different ways of being, experimenting with possible selves, while judgments and, for the most part, consequences are suspended (p.203). If in face-to-face interactions I have difficulty expressing anger, or stating my opinions, or talking about my feelings, online I can try these stances out, and if they work, bring them into my offline repertoire. While it is true that consequences to one’s offline life are generally suspended in a game like Everquest, players do invest quite a lot of time into each character, who develops an in-game reputation. Because the help of other characters is necessary for many in-game accomplishments, one would imagine characters feel

somehow constrained in their behavior within the game. In this study, inquiry into the dialogue between character and player, and into the ways the player does or does not feel free to act within game could add nuance to Turkle's proposition that online role-playing games are safe places for trying out new interactions. Turkle also highlighted the difficulty in adopting an identity that is very different from one's own when she wrote that, "maintaining an artificial persona very different from one's sense of oneself in RL is what one [internet user] called 'cheap fuel,' a novelty that wears thin fast because of the large amount of 'psychic energy' required to maintain it" (p.205).

This idea that it is draining to try to be someone who is very different from your conception of your possible selves runs counter to Young's (1996, 1997) idea that heavy internet users are fascinated by the anonymity of the medium. Maintaining a persona that is wholly different and anonymous would also likely interfere with the constructive use of role play to make meaningful relationships that enrich one's offline lives. Though these relationships may still be 'anonymous' in the sense that they do not involve the same expression of self that face-to-face interactions do, some connection to an aspect of self seems necessary for the relationships to be meaningful. Gergen might understand our online relationships as evidence for the disappearance of the 'true self' and the emergence of a relational self, in which relationships become primary and the self emerges from them. Gergen wrote, "the disappearance of 'true self' encourages one to search for the kinds of persons or situations that will enable the various actors in one's ensemble to play their parts" (2000, p.178). To express the varied aspects of self, we seek the "*fractional relationship*, a relationship built around a limited aspect of one's being" (p.178). Rather than being anonymous when online, or being deceptive in role-

playing someone different from the self that I play in face-to-face interactions, I am participating in a real relationship as a real self, simply displaying and inhibiting different aspects of myself in various situations.

If we are engaged in fractional relationships as parts of ourselves online (and off?), how do we maintain a coherent sense of self at all? Turkle (1997) wrote of the multiplicity of identity in MUDs:

Without any principle of coherence, the self spins off in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate. Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to the point of immobility. How can we be multiple and coherent at the same time? (p.258)

For Gergen (2000), the answer to this dilemma of multiple selves lies in relationships becoming central to our definition of self. (pp.146-7) For Turkle (1997), it is a conception of self as fluid yet “grounded in coherence and a moral outlook” (p.258). She contrasted the fluid self with Multiple Personality Disorder/Dissociative Identity Disorder, noting that while dissociative identities are separate with “the need for rigid walls between the selves (blocking the secrets those selves protect),” fluid or flexible selves are “nonunitary but with fluid access among their many aspects” (p.260). When conceptualized in this way, the idea that one is being deceptive by role-playing someone other than their face-to-face self loses its meaning. Indeed, Gergen (2000) noted “the sense of ‘playing a role’ depends for its palpability on the contrasting sense of ‘a real self’” (p.150). Thus, for Turkle, it seems that online role-playing, to be productive (or not destructive), must be a sort of grounded continuation of the offline self, whereas for Gergen, the identifications we make online need not hold together in any sense – each instance of identification stands on its own. Everquest would seem to offer a player both

possibilities – one can create, delete, and recreate many different characters and a wide range of identifications, or one might devote years of playing to one or two characters and take part in interactions that are very similar to one’s daily offline life. This study will bring particular players’ experiences to bear on these questions and explore their sense of the dialogue between the realm of the game and “real life.”

Psychodynamic views

Psychodynamic thinkers, such as Lacan and Judith Butler, provide some insight into the limitations of identification one might expect to encounter, even in computer-mediated situations in which one would, in theory, be free to present oneself in any way. These writers can also help clarify concepts like identity and identification as they are relevant to this study.

I would like to consider online and offline identify in psychoanalytic terms, as identification. Through identification with others I develop certain ideas about the kind of person I am (or what sort of Everquest character I portray) and I begin to see certain traits, aspirations, and values as more important than others. For social constructionist and psychodynamic thinkers, it is only through my interactions with others that I get the idea of an “I” at all. Gergen has explained that the internet and other technologies have increased the number of possible identities from which we may choose, but Lacan and other dynamic thinkers can help us understand how our choices might be constrained. I will describe Lacan’s understanding of the formation of the subject, and later ask how can we apply psychodynamic thinking about identity formation to the creation of an online persona.

Lacan, in his discussion of a split subject, emphasized that the subject is always somehow alienated from him or herself. My own sense of my identity does not spring from myself, but from an Other. Before I was born, my parents spoke about me in a language that was handed down to them. They might have discussed their hopes and plans for me, and they chose a name for me. In the same way, every child is “born into a preestablished place in its parents’ linguistic universe, a space often prepared many months, if not years before the child sees the light of day” (Fink, 1995, p.5). Before a baby learns to speak, parents and others continue to narrate the baby’s existence in a language foreign to him or her: “she’s a shy little girl,” or “what a strong boy you are!” When the baby cries, the parents translate the baby’s desire into language. In order to get what it wants in the most expeditious way possible, the baby must begin to speak the parent’s language, however, its desires are “molded in that very process, for the words [it is] obliged to use are not [its] own and do not necessarily correspond to [its] own particular demands: [its] very desires are cast in the mold of the language or languages [it] learn[s]” (1995, p.6). The language of the Other prepares a place for us as subjects and names our desires, and we must take up this language to express our desires.

Lacan emphasized that coming to be a subject in language is always an experience of both identification and alienation. In his work on the mirror stage, he articulated the way in which our first recognition of ourselves as a subject, an “I,” depends on the recognition and language of an Other. At a time when an infant is “for a short while...outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence” (Lacan, 2002, p.3), he or she is nonetheless able to recognize his or her own image in a mirror. Lacan noted this as an important moment of identification with the image in the mirror, in which “the

I is precipitated in a primordial form” (2002, p.4). In this sub-chimpanzee state of development, the image the mirror presents to the child is more unified, more integrated than the child’s own experience, and it offers a “structuring image” (Fink, 1997, p.88) around which the child’s ego may develop. Lacan called this somewhat premature sense of self the “ideal-I” and noted that this “ideal-I” is the “rootstock of secondary identifications” (Lacan, 2002, p.4).

The image of the self that the baby acquires in the mirror stage is the foundation for any other identifications that he or she will later make, but a shaky one. Lacan noted that the assumption of the image as ‘I’ “situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction” in that the subject will henceforth struggle with “his discordance with his own reality” (Lacan, 2002, p.4). The sense of unity the mirror image gives us, of an integrated whole, outstrips our actual sense of unity or integration, and the ‘I’ that we suppose ourselves to be in the mirror stage will always remain outside our reach – something to strive toward, but not to be achieved. Lacan wrote that this happens “prior to its social determination,” but in later writings on the mirror stage, noted that even this assumption of the image as a basis for the formation of a sense of self is dependent on the Other’s recognition. He later wrote that “the mirror stage is internalized and invested with libido because of an approving gesture made by the parent who is holding the child before the mirror,” and noted that though the child may take some notice of its image in a mirror before the mirror stage, “it does not become formative of the ego, of a sense of self, unless it is *ratified* by a person of importance to the child” (Fink, 1997, p.88). It is the parent’s smile, nod, or approving remark that sets the stage both for the child’s first sense of selfhood (ideal ego), and for

the creation of the ego-ideal, which incorporates the parents' views of the child. In this formation of the ego-ideal, the child "internalizes its parents' ideals...and judges itself in accordance with those ideals" (p.88).

For Freud, the ego-ideal is related to, though not always synonymous with, the superego (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p.144-5), and for Lacan, to "the totality of the demands of the law" (Lacan, 1988, p.134). It sets the standard by which we measure ourselves, and Lacan pointed out that we often come up short. Since before the child was born, parents and others have spoken about the kind of person the child will be, and thus the child's "existence is already pleaded innocent or guilty before he comes into the world" and there will necessarily "be a case of mistaken identity" (Lacan, 2005, p.653). The ideals that the parents have chosen for the child, and that the child later adopts as his or her own, are alien to him or her. Lacan wrote that a "pole of attributes is what the subject is before he is born (and perhaps it is under their mass that he will suffocate once born" (2005, p.652). These attributes that hold the place of the subject before he or she enters the world become the ego-ideal, wrote Lacan, and the neurotic recognizes that he or she does not quite fit this image of self that the Other has prepared for him or her, but forever tries to be recognized by the Other as having those attributes and achieving that image of self (2005, p.652, 679). Lacan wrote about the way the neurotic works to have the Other reflect an image of the ego-ideal back to him: "this is precisely how the neurotic handles the Other in order to constantly renew his sketchy identifications in the wild transference that legitimates our use of the term 'transference neurosis'" (2005, p.679). After the creation of the ego-ideal in the mirror stage, the subject works, in all of his or her relationships, to realize this ideal (and to be recognized as realizing it).

Lacan might argue, in contrast to writers like Gergen, that we are not so free in our identifications. Even with the various possibilities for identification that are presented to us via media like Everquest, we are always aiming at the same goal in our identifications and in our relationships with others, and thus will probably find a limited range of identifications to be consonant with our ego-ideal. When creating a character in Everquest, then, we might expect the player to choose a persona that is something like what he or she is striving to be in offline life. When Kimberly Young wrote that internet “dependents” use the internet “to reconstruct an ‘ideal self’ which they use to “fulfill an unmet need” (1997, p.5) she seems to insinuate that this is a problematic handling of identifications. Lacan helps us to understand that we are all trying, in our interactions in any medium, to identify with our ego-ideal, which we all somehow fail to do. We all experience this sort of “unmet need” and, in a sense, are always reconstructing an “ideal self.”

How, then, does the creation of an online persona, such as an Everquest character, work? If we can think of the experience of presenting oneself to others online as similar to the encounter with the self through the affirmation of the Other as in the mirror stage, surely we are better prepared this time. The Everquest player is certainly not still “outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence” (2002, Lacan, p.3); he or she has by now a coherent sense of the body and some conception of self, and has acquired language. Online I can tell others how I wish to be perceived, and can choose the body (in image or in language) that I will present to others. If we might think about all identifications as involving performances of identity, does this notion take on particular relevance in the context of an online role-playing game?

Though her writing focuses on gender and sexuality, Judith Butler's (1993) discussion of performance and identity seems relevant here as well. She explained that the notion of gender as performance does not imply the freedom to choose to identify with any gender, any time:

The agency denoted by the performativity of "sex" will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which he/she opposes. The paradox of subjectification is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (p.15)

Butler cautioned us against thinking "performativity" means acting outside of the symbolic law, or of the norms of the discourse within which we live. We are limited in the identities which we may choose to perform, and Butler argued that, in fact, these limitations are what allow us to become recognized as subjects at all. We become subjects by taking up a recognized place within language (as the infant gains a sense of "I" through the instatement of the ego-ideal), not from outside of it. While Butler did not argue that sex is entirely fixed or prior to discourse, she noted that "sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate 'constructivism' with 'the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases.' A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice" (1993, p.94). The same might be said of identity; though the infant may not come into the world with any particular essential traits or characteristics, the parents' discourse molds an identity for him or her before she arrives. In turn, the language of the parents molds the kind of speech the parents will use about their child – whether this baby will be made of sugar and spice and everything nice or whales, snails, and puppydog tails, for example. From this perspective, the online gamer

is no freer in his or her performance, though he or she constructs his or her character in perhaps a more deliberate way than in face-to-face interactions. Butler (1993) wrote, “The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity” (p.94). While the format of online gaming calls for one to create a character, to engage in a performance of that character, the player’s personal and cultural history delineate the range of performances that are allowed, online or off.

Fantasy and projection in an interpersonal realm

Just as our choice of how to create an online persona may be restricted by our history, writers such as Derek Foster (1997) noted that we might tend to interact in characteristic, projective ways online – that in the absence of very much information about the other, we interact mostly with ourselves. Turkle (1997) also noted the propensity for projection online: “MUDs encourage projection and the development of transferences for some of the same reasons that a classical Freudian analytic situation does” (p.207). Just as the analyst sits behind the patient and maintains a neutral stance so as to be a blank screen for projection, our conversants sit somewhere behind a computer screen, and we are left with no visual or vocal cues to interfere with our projections onto them. Turkle continued, “In MUDs, the lack of information about the real person to whom one is talking, the silence into which one types, the absence of visual cues, all these encourage projection. This situation leads to exaggerated likes and dislikes, to idealization and demonization” (p.207). Foster noted the potentially isolating structure of the internet; we use it to follow our own interests, find information we are looking for.

“In this respect,” he wrote, “the self is pursued, but not entirely in blissful ignorance of the other. It is merely that the other has been relegated to a sub-strata of the self” (1997, p.26). In the words of Mark Taylor, Foster described the process of online relating: “The striving subject enters into the conversation in order to build itself up through the search for truth. Thus the person who converses relates to herself/himself even when s/he seems to be relating to others” (Taylor, 1991, p.17). Foster argued that when we do begin to feel a part of a group or relationship online, it is because we have successfully projected ourselves onto the other or others. In speaking of the “we-feeling” of online groups, he wrote “it is altogether too easy to ignore difference, and to attribute one’s image of self to the other instead of defining one’s self in reference to the other” (1997, p.28).

Though the point on the ease of projection in online conversations is a very valid one, we might wonder how to integrate it with Turkle’s conception of the internet as a place for transformation through trying on different expressions of self. If online conversation is somewhat akin to classical analysis in the anonymity of the other, classical analysts have taught that change happens only when the analysand’s projections come into question. While several writers have recognized the potential of the internet to be isolating (Foster, 1997; Gergen, 2000; Kraut et al., 1996, 1998, 2002; Turkle1997) many have also recognized possible positive consequences of online interactions. Turkle (1997) pondered the psychological impact of the internet: “Will it be a separate world where people get lost in the surfaces or will we learn to see how the real and the virtual can be made permeable, each having the potential for enriching and expanding the other? The citizens of MUDs are our pioneers” (p.268). Turkle ultimately advocated

understanding the internet as a tool for understanding ourselves in real life, for using the virtual to inform the real:

Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or as meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our own risk. We must understand the dynamics of virtual experience both to foresee who might be in danger and to put these experiences to best use. Without a deep understanding of the many selves that we can express in the virtual we cannot use our experiences to enrich the real. If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation. (p.269)

This study will provide an opening to explore players' sense of the process of creating an Everquest character, the ways in which he or she feels their character and patterns of interacting in Everquest recapitulate offline dynamics. Because Everquest, among other online media, particularly encourages role-playing and fantasy, the game provides an interesting context in which to explore players' abilities and limitations in playing out fantasies.

Phenomenological and cyborg views

In the "social laboratory" (Turkle, 1997, p.180) of Everquest, what becomes of the player's body? David Porter, writing on internet culture, asserted that "people log on to newsgroups, listservers, and the interactive role-playing sites known as MUDs and MOOs for the same reason they might hang out at a bar or on a street corner or at the coffee machine at work" (1997, p.xii). However, hanging out online is decidedly different from doing any of these things. When I am in physical space, my presence is communicated through many channels: for example, my dress, posture, expression, tone, perhaps even my smell and feel. All of these depend on the physical presence of my body. Online, my conversants are left only with my words, which can contribute to the

“cool” feeling of interactions in cyberspace (Wallace 1999). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the body is somehow absent online. Annette Markham (1998) explained,

Although cyberspace is nothing more or less than a network of computer systems passing digitized strings of information back and forth through copper or fiber-optic cables, people who connect to this network often feel a *sense of presence* when they are online. Even in purely text-based online contexts, people establish and maintain intimate friendships, romantic relationships, and stable communities. (p.17)

This sense of presence does not often happen spontaneously for internet users. People who “chat” with a stranger over the internet can be struck by the surreal quality of the interaction. There is sometimes a bewildering sense that identity becomes fluid, even irrelevant – I could be anybody, it seems, and so could my interlocutor. It can be a very disorienting and disembodied experience; I have sometimes felt like a disincarnate conglomeration of words and ideas, as my companion feels to me, despite my efforts to imagine him or her otherwise. Markham (1998) explained, however, that developing a sense of telepresence requires that we become a body, a self online; “to be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate.” (p.23)

Becoming embodied in a space where the body cannot enter is a tall order indeed. However, Merleau-Ponty (1962) provides a clue as to how this might be done. In his discussion of habit, Merleau-Ponty described a woman’s seemingly natural ability to move about without disturbing a feather attached to her hat. She does so not calculatingly, but as if the feather and the hat are extensions of her body (1962, p.143). Similarly, he explained:

If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can ‘get through’ without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body. (1962, p.143)

The hat and the car are experienced as parts of the body, not separate tools. In the same way, when a blind man becomes accustomed to using a stick, it “has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight” (1962, p.143). This point is central to achieving embodiment online. The phenomenon of telepresence, of meaningful computer-mediated expression of emotion, and the development of significant relationships with those we never meet in the face-to-face world depend on the extension of our sense of our feeling bodies.

In Everquest, a player creates a visual representation of his or her character with distinctive features, and players have the opportunity through text chat to “flesh out” their characters’ actions, expressions, and thoughts with words. These representations of the self and the body may become subsumed into our conception of our offline self and body. Whatever modes of representation are involved in the creation and performance of our online selves (images, text, sound), we may become embodied online by allowing that online representation of the self and the body to become a habitual extension of the body and its projects. Merleau-Ponty (1962) wrote, “To get used to a hat, a car, or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into our own body” (p.143). In fact, I recall undergoing something like an online version of Lacan’s “mirror stage” as other online characters began recognizing me as a person like themselves and including me in their discourse (Lacan, 2002, p.4). The effect was something like the parent’s confirmation of the baby marveling at her own image in the mirror – “yes, baby – that’s

you!” (Fink, 1997, p.88). Through this pixilated version of myself, others were able to recognize something of me, something that was able to touch me emotionally with bodily feelings of happiness and pride. The link between the body and its online extension is emotion, however one must learn to make this emotional link between the person sitting at the computer and the character appearing on the screen.

The blind man’s stick extends his sense of touch, but not exactly as an outstretched hand does. By incorporating extensions of the body, the senses are necessarily transformed. In lending our bodies to online avatars of ourselves, we must change our ways of relating, just as the blind man’s use of a stick changes his ways of touching. Everquest, and most other formats for online interaction, offers ways to express what might normally be conveyed through paralinguistics such as facial expression, tone, gesture, and posture. Players may use “smileys,” text made to look like a face, or may use special commands to display text for those in the immediate environment describing a person’s actions or expression, such as “Peleg beams a smile at Edilye.” Some of these commands actually cause the image of the character onscreen to perform the action as an animation, such as waving hello or goodbye. Still, an online smile and a face to face smile are very different things.

No matter how expressive one may be in text, expressions of emotion are not spontaneous online. Annette Markham (1999) explained: “The experience of being a body in and through text is unusual and unique. I had to think about what I was feeling in order to write it down and show the other participants” (p.48). Markham related her initial confusion over when or how to express emotion appropriately. For example, in ordinary conversation, I can smile as a friend tells a story to communicate empathy or

understanding without interrupting the speaker herself. In text-based online communication, I would have to learn how and when to interrupt the text of the friend's story with the text "Jenn smiles understandingly." This process of translating one's nonverbal communications into language is not unique to Everquest or the internet, of course, but happens as well with patients undergoing analysis by phone or persons engaging in phone sex. The internet, and particularly Everquest, are simply new media to which we must adapt to make ourselves known.

Though we must adapt our expression of emotion to become more fully present online, text can be made to carry the emotional impact of paralinguistics. Markham (1999) recounted her frustration that she could not pick up on tone or facial expression in her online interviews, but added, "through their words and through my interaction with them, I could sense joy, anger, passion, bitterness, happiness. In fact, I was surprised and impressed by the intensity of the conversations" (p.71). The use of text, through "smileys" or textual expressions of emotion are central to creating a social world online and are particularly valuable to the Everquest population. One study investigated emotional expression and friendship formation of users of MUDs and reported the following findings: "Over time, people get used to CMC [computer-mediated-communication] and come to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues by using linguistic cues. The more that MUDDers used smileys and the MUD-specific feelings and emotes, the more friendships they formed" (Utz, 2000, p.18). (This study by Utz bridges a gap between work on understanding self and relationship online and a whole body of work focused on the "effectiveness" of computer-mediated-communication in business.) Players who have learned to become embodied by expressing their emotions

through online channels, who have extended their sense of themselves and of their emotional bodies to include their online characters, are more likely to connect with other players in genuine friendships. In another study (Yee, 2001) aimed particularly at players of Everquest, the researcher asked participants to rate how appealing a series of changes to the game would be. Female players rated “enhanced emotes, expressions, and gestures” most favorable, above changes concerning gameplay, such as “more spell types,” “more weapon types,” and “the ability to construct your own room/house/fort based on a new Architecture skill” (p.20). Male players ranked “enhanced emotes, expressions, and gestures” second behind “more spell types” (p.20). These responses underscore the importance of the interpersonal aspect of the game to players over strictly game-related aspects, and point to online expression of emotions as the vehicle for extending one’s sense of self to the Everquest character.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s work, we can see the Everquest character as a sort of tool, like a car or a blind man’s stick, which, invested with our intentionality toward the world, becomes temporarily incorporated into the body. He and the above-mentioned theorists explained that a process akin to a second socialization is required in order to extend one’s sense of presence to an online persona, such as an Everquest character. Cyborg theorists offer a slightly different perspective on this process of becoming an embodied self online. Thinking broadly about information and communication technologies (ICT), S by (2000) wrote of the prosthesis and the cyborg as alternate frameworks which can “explain and summarize the main issues surrounding (re)socialization in cyberspace” (p. 3). The prosthesis, he wrote, is “an extension of the

body and the senses,” while “the cyborg is a virtual identity form; a postmodern and multiple ‘subject’ that works and plays in a cyberworld” (p.3).

Søby (2000) noted that many thinkers, among them Freud, have remarked that machines have acted as prostheses for humankind, allowing us to escape the limitations of our bodies (p.7). Technological advances like the motor, telephone, and internet all allow us to bring far corners of the earth close and make obscure information immediately available. More recently, though, theorists like Paul Virilio (1995) have become concerned that newer prostheses, rather than acting as extensions of our bodies to help us explore our world, will begin to penetrate the body, moving the colonization inward: “the very recent advent of nanotechnological miniaturization promotes biotechnology's physiological intrusion into, or insemination of, the living organism” (p.99). Virilio imagined that technological prostheses such as the internet will be absorbed into the body in an effort to escape its limitations: “the disabled person equipped to overcome his handicap suddenly becomes the model for the able-bodied person superequipped with prostheses of all kinds” (p.101) and anticipated that technological prostheses meant to alter or enhance our psychic life will be a major part of the technological colonization of the body (pp.101-102).

For Virilio (1995), then, the humankind’s use of technological prostheses leads us inevitably toward a cyborg existence in which “the human body is obsolete” (p.110). He noted the claim of a performance artist specializing in technical interactions with the body: “I believe that evolution ends with the technological invasion of the body” (p.111). Virilio feared that, in this situation, the body would be neglected “thanks in particular to

the teleaction that has once and for all supplanted immediate action” (pp.102-3) and that the mind would be stimulated and controlled, not by chemical technologies as today, but by implanted microchip versions of Prozac and the like (pp. 101-2). In Virilio’s imagining of the union of human and machine, “everything rushes at man, man – the target – is assailed on all sides” by a host of information (p.132).

Virilio’s view of the prosthesis which becomes incorporated into the body and eventually dominates it has been criticized for becoming a “tale...of epic proportions” in which technology “becomes the motor in a story of decline” as it destroys the “harmony between Man and his surroundings” (Søby, 2000, p.10). Indeed, it is hard to imagine that internet users or Everquest players are after this sort of union or merger with their online characters, though Virilio might certainly argue that we might never *intend* to become this kind of cyborg, and that it might be very possible that Everquest players do hope to use their characters as prostheses that allow them to somehow escape their everyday lives, or the limitations of their bodies.

Haraway (2004), however, in her writing about the cyborg, strove to warn us against “demonizing science and technology as agent of dehumanization” (Kaplan, 2004, p.91), and encouraged us to “overcome our desire for organic wholeness, original unity, and a nostalgic return to a pure, uncorrupted state of nature” (p.91). Rather, Haraway (2004) encourages us, with her conception of the cyborg, to find “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and...*responsibility* in their construction” (p.8). Whereas Virilio (1995) seemed to imagine technology penetrating humankind, Haraway (2004) suggested an intertwining or dialogue between humankind and technology, in which lies the

potential to overcome dualisms inherent in the aforementioned wish for “organic wholeness.” Kaplan (2004) explained, “because cyborg imagery includes both human and machine, it suggests ways of overcoming theories that propose false dichotomies and privilege one part of the dyad over the other” (p.91). For Haraway (2004), the image of the cyborg does not leave behind the body as obsolete, but accepts the animal, the human, and the machine as all parts of the self. She wrote, “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kindship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (p.13). Thus, the cyborg identity is capable of encompassing the multiple vantage points of these partial identities.

Both Virilio (1995) and Haraway (2004) described the potential movement of technological prostheses inward to create a hybrid being. However, one might see Haraway’s conception as a hopeful one, finding in new technology a point of rupture in socially constructed dualisms and hierarchies, whereas Virilio’s conception is suspicious that the movement of technology into the body will be one of mastery rather than integration. Meanwhile, Turkle (2004), noting computer users’ meaningful attachment to their technological devices (such as computers, PDAs or iPods), has written, “today, the new objects of our lives call upon psychoanalytic theory to create an object relations theory that really is about objects in the everyday sense of the word” (p.417). While none of these theorists were writing about Everquest or even the internet in particular, we might still wonder how their ideas would apply to the Everquest player. How much do players want the game, or their character, to be a part of them? Is the character a prosthesis, a tool for experiencing something outside of the player’s everyday realm, or

does the Everquest player seek a cyborg-like union with the character and the game? How might Merleau-Ponty's (1962) understanding of the absorption of tools into the body be made relevant in the technology of Everquest?

Compared to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological thinking about the body and its tools, cyborg theory has a feeling of inevitability. We might imagine, from Haraway (2004) or Virilio's (1995) perspective, today's Everquest players are on a course that ends in complete integration of the player and character, where the game and offline life are no longer separate realms. For Merleau-Ponty, the tools that we incorporate as lived parts of our bodies need not remain so; they can be taken up or shed at will, depending on our aims at the time. Though he was not writing about internet or microchip technology, in Merleau-Ponty's argument about hats, cars, and walking sticks becoming part of the body, we can imagine a corresponding attitude toward virtual tools like an Everquest character; a player could take up an Everquest character as a part of one's lived experience of oneself, but this need not prevent him or her from dropping this tool in favor of another when his or her intentionality changes. In other words, from this perspective, the game would be its own reality, separate from the player's daily life, and the character would be a tool that allows the player to access this experience.

Virilio (1995) provides some examples of people who long for the colonization of the body by technology, the integration of human and machine, but this study can give insight into whether the experience of Everquest players is a desire to infuse their lives with the experience of the game – to become cyborg combinations of their offline and online selves. Do they imagine their characters as extensions of themselves? Does this

extension lead to a merger or intertwining of the real and virtual worlds? Do they rather see the game as a separate world that they access through the character – a prosthesis perhaps, but one they can relinquish or remove when they stop playing the game?

Understanding the players' experience of the game in this respect might also shed light on the question of how to compare online and offline experiences – do our concepts in the offline world (the dualisms and hierarchies Haraway hopes to escape as cyborg) remain relevant in the online world, or must online experience stand on its own, a separate reality unto itself?

Room for more study

While Turkle argued convincingly for inquiry into the self online and the psychological impact of internet use, the field is still very young. Much of the writing on online identity comes from thinkers in English or Communications fields (for example, Foster, 1997; McRae, 1997; Markham, 1998; Porter, 1997). Much of the existing psychological work on online communications is oriented toward industrial and organizational concerns. Another, slightly less sizable portion of psychological writing on the internet is concerned with an addictions model of understanding internet use, as presented by Young (1996, 1997). Despite the efforts of these writers, the question of what makes internet use so compelling that users would give up offline socialization time for it remains without a definitive answer. Wallace (1999) wrote, “Here we begin to wander into some uncharted research territory, but Young’s study, and many of the anecdotes and case histories that reached her as a result of its publicity, suggest there are indeed some very compelling psychological spaces on the Internet” (181). Rheingold (2000) asked, “What kind of person do I become when I spend hours a day

communicating through the mediation of virtual communities? Despite the obvious importance of this question, relatively little social science research has been directed at the cognitive and emotional effects of online communications” (p.352). Of the research that has been done, Rheingold pointed to Turkle’s *Life on the Screen* (1997) as the most in-depth.

Much remains to be explored in the area of online identity and relationships, and as the technology and its place in our lives is always changing, even old discoveries can be revisited. While many of the writers on psychological impacts of the internet used MUDs as their focus of study, today’s formats like Everquest, which combine the textual aspects of a MUD with visuals in a slightly different context, are becoming much more popular. Though players are not interacting with images of the other users themselves (players choose from available “avatars”), the presence of an image representing the player provides more opportunities for “fleshing out” one’s character than text alone. Everquest, perhaps more than MUDs, encourages the formation of social groups called guilds, facilitating the development of in-game relationships. Thanks to the increasing availability of the internet at work and at home, the relationships within a guild need not be bound to playing time; many guilds make websites, including message boards for conversation outside of the game. Some players in a guild I belong to have indicated to me that they keep a window to this message board open on their computers at work all day to chat with other guild members when they cannot play the game itself. Members of the same guild also recently had a “reunion” in which several members gathered to spend a weekend together, face-to-face. The crossover of relationships from online to offline is especially interesting in light of the question of online and offline selves. It also

highlights the potential for real connection online. Not all Everquest guilds or players share the desire to know their online friends in offline life; some guilds have strict rules against discussing “RL” in guild chat or on websites.

Clearly, the answer to questions about what makes spending time in Everquest attractive, and about what a person’s relationship is to other players and to his or her own characters, will be different for different groups of players. Nonetheless, the very existence of around 420,000 players (Sony, 2002) spending twenty or more hours a week on average (Yee, 2001, p.12) indicates that there is something very compelling about the game. The literature on internet addiction/problematic internet use provides one understanding of why some spend so much time online, to the exclusion of offline activities and relationships, and have, in some cases, gone on to look for a viable treatment, but I believe there is much about this question still to be explored. How do players experience the process of making a character and presenting themselves online? Do they feel they are expressing some aspect of themselves that they cannot offline, or is their self-presentation similar across the online-offline divide? What is their experience of relating to others online and the limitations of online contact? Do their interactions online touch their offline lives in any way, or vice versa? It is my goal to explore the players’ understanding of the dialogue between their Everquest and offline experiences. As Everquest and other similar online formats become more popular, our possibilities for the “serious play” Turkle mentioned become broader. It is important to consider the psychological implications of this movement in its own terms, not through the lens of addictions. There is much more to be learned about this topic.

Method

Chapter 3

Understanding the possibilities the internet presents in the realm of identity and relationships will be relevant not only for those whose internet use is very heavy ("internet addicts" and those close to them), but for all of us as we come to terms with the way this technology changes our conception of self and relationships. This sort of change is already apparent in relation to internet dating services, which seemed at first suspicious and possibly dangerous, but which are enjoying growing acceptance.

Everquest is a particularly interesting area for further study of this phenomenon for several reasons. First, Everquest presents an immersive online world that is conducive to creating an online persona and online relationships in a way that most other online platforms are not. While earlier studies of online personae and relationships focused on MUDs, Everquest is a richer environment in that it allows for visual and textual information. Second, Everquest and MMORPGs like it are much more popular today than MUDs, and offer a wider and more diverse subscriber base than most MUDs, which were often populated mostly by college students. Finally, Everquest is widely known for its "addictive" quality; the average player spends many hours per week in the game, and many report becoming very personally invested in it, sometimes to the detriment of their offline lives. If there are certain qualities that make online interactions attractive to heavy internet users, they must certainly be present in Everquest. For these reasons I chose to approach the broad question of how people experience themselves and their interactions with others online through the specific medium of Everquest.

Research model

I approached this project from a phenomenological viewpoint, in which the goal of research can be understood as “a characterization of implicit and explicit dimensions of a phenomenon lived by research participants” (Walsh, 1995, p.337). In this case, I aimed to use interviews with Everquest players to understand something of their experience of the dialogue between Everquest character and player in terms of identification and of relationships with others. I strove to use what Wertz (1984) termed “reflective empirical procedures” to gain access to “important aspects of lived experience...unavailable to the conscious reflection of the subject” (Walsh, 1995, p.336). As Walsh (1995) explained, these aspects of lived experience are not necessarily unconscious in the psychodynamic sense of the word, but lie outside the participants’ conscious awareness as they are experiencing the phenomenon in question. Through reflection on and interpretation of my interactions with Everquest players, I hoped to arrive at “a characterization of implicit and explicit dimensions of a phenomenon lived by research participants” (Walsh, 1994, p.337).

To make implicit aspects of phenomena explicit, phenomenological researchers may follow a two-step process described by Wertz (1984) as handling and sense making. Handling, which includes the following steps: “(a) empathic presence to the described phenomenon, (b) slowing down and patiently dwelling, (c) amplification of details, (d) turning from objects to immanent meanings, and (e) suspending belief and employing interest” (Walsh, 1995, p.337). In this process, the researcher attempts to “see the phenomenon in a careful, attentive, and empathic manner” (p.337) through the interaction with the participant. Next, the researcher moves to sense making, which involves: “(a)

recognition and utilization of an existential baseline, (b) distinguishing constituents, (c) reflection on judgment of relevance, (d) grasping implicit meanings, (e) relating constituents, (f) imaginative variation, (g) conceptually guided interrogation, and (h) psychological languaging” (pp.337-8). In this process, the researcher considers what is revealed and what covered over by the participants’ words and attempts to bring to light and critically examine implicit aspects of the participants’ lived experience. Finally, after a close interpretive reading of the texts from individual participants, Walsh (1995) explained, “the researcher moves beyond the ‘situated structure’ of specific participants to interpret a ‘general structure’ common across instances of the phenomenon” (p.338).

To say that the researcher arrives at a “general structure” of common aspects of the researched phenomenon is not to imply that this general structure is somehow objective or universal. Walsh (1994) explained that this structure arises “in response to the researcher’s presuppositions” and that “the structure...of any phenomenon is the structure as seen by a particular researcher *from the vantage point of a particular approach*” (p.338, italics original).

From a phenomenological perspective, the presence of the researcher in his or her particular approach is not an obstacle to be neutralized or bracketed off, but an integral part of the production and analysis of interview texts. Walsh (2004) notes that our goal in conducting an interview for phenomenological investigation is to enter into conversation with the participant about his or her lived experience, rather than soliciting the participant’s opinions or ideas about an experience (p.9). He pointed out that understanding between participant and researcher is facilitated when both are “caught up in language” or “within a ready-to-hand mode of engagement” (p.12). In this sense, then,

the researcher's approach allows him or her to become a conversant in dialogue with the participant, rather than a neutral questioner. As the researcher becomes such an influential part of the creation of the "text" of the interview, it is essential that "the researcher's indelible presence within the conversation...be made explicit and remain explicit throughout all levels of analysis" (Walsh, 2004, p.15).

Walsh (1995) suggested a procedure for acknowledging the researcher's approach at the start of a project, and for maintaining awareness of the impact of the researcher throughout interpretation and discussion. He recommended an initial "acknowledgement of a priori assumptions" in which "the researcher can write down explicit aspects of his or her approach to the phenomenon. Included in this disclosure can be a description of the researcher's interest in the phenomenon" as his or her entrance into the study (p.341). After the handling and sense-making steps of analysis, the researcher may return to self-reflection and note explicitly in their research "their reactions and impressions while carrying out reflective and empirical procedures" (p.341). In the presentation and discussion of research findings, the researcher may reflect on the experience of handling and sense making, and may also note the ways in which his or her assumptions or ideas changed in the process of the research. Walsh (1995) explained that by disclosing the researcher's approach, "we can provide our research community with means for comparison, evaluation, and – most importantly – critical dialogue" (p.339). Owning and reflecting on the researcher's own frame for approaching and understanding phenomena makes phenomenological research rigorous and opens it for discussion.

Preliminary self-analysis

Recognizing the importance and impact of articulating the researcher's vantage into phenomenon studied, I began this study with reflection on my approach to Everquest. While I have already mentioned, through a review of the literature, theoretical reasons for studying online identity and relating through Everquest, I am drawn to the subject because of the personal relevance it has for me.

Having enjoyed computer games (primarily the offline variety) for some time, I was introduced to Everquest by a former boyfriend. I had some experience with online video games, and had the impression that the online gaming world was cold and impersonal, where players' only focus was defeating others in any manner possible. I was not interested, but he was quickly fascinated by the game. He spent most of his free time playing, and would sometimes read to me the conversations that were going on between players. I decided to give it a try.

I met players who fit my expectations for online gamers perfectly – rude, inconsiderate, focused on being better than others – however I also met players who were kind, helpful, and funny. I began to speak with those players regularly when I was online, and they became something like friends. Sometimes I found, especially when in the company of these online friends, I played longer than I intended to – sometimes sacrificing sleep to do so.

Though Everquest never significantly interfered with other aspects of my life, through playing the game, I met and heard about many people who were not so lucky. I knew players who neglected work, school, family, or friends for Everquest, and I even experienced feeling personally neglected for that online world. I learned about online

support forums for people whose loved ones had “abandoned” them for Everquest, such as EQ Widows. I read of marriages ending and families being torn apart because loved ones felt neglected by their Everquest-playing significant others, and I began to wonder about this medium that had the paradoxical power to connect and separate. Playing Everquest myself, I felt that I had made some friends who were very real, yet somehow different from (and certainly no replacement for) my offline friends. I wondered how those people who favored Everquest over face-to-face interactions felt about their online friends; my personal experience with heavy Everquest players was mixed; some seemed to spend endless hours with casual acquaintances without any particular friends, while others seemed to find in Everquest a second social circle, with some close friends. I also found it interesting that heavy Everquest use did not seem to be the refuge of the socially inept; some who spent long hours in the game led otherwise socially impoverished lives, while others had thriving social supports in the offline world. Knowing the ways games like Everquest can impact a variety of people has led me to an interest in the particular attractions, frustrations, and meanings of this mode of communication, particularly in the arena of Everquest.

Because of my personal experience with Everquest, it was important for me to monitor my own reactions to my object of study. As a former Everquest player, I could fall too easily into being defensive of my pastime, blind to the negative aspects of online relating. On the other hand, as one who has felt rejected in favor of electronic friends, I might be too eager to find fault with heavy Everquest players. I hoped, however, that both of these experiences might facilitate my becoming an “engaged, embodied co-participant” (Walsh, 2004, p.13) in dialogue with my participants.

In addition to the above account of my interest in the subject, I have tried to further explicate my assumptions about the subject by writing my responses to my own interview guide questions (see Appendix 4). In reflecting on my own protocol, I see myself endorsing the idea that online personae (Edilye, in this case) are strongly connected to the player's own conception of self. While this may not be the case for all players, my experience of the game is not an anonymous one; I play a character I identify with, whose reputation online I am concerned about, and I look forward to playing with other people that I feel I know, in some sense. While writing my own protocol, I found myself thinking fondly about old online friends and how I enjoyed chatting with them. Others certainly may not enjoy this kind of interaction in the game. I must be aware of my own tendencies to paint online interactions and identities in a positive light because I tend to see them so.

My self-reflection did not stop with the articulation of my conscious presuppositions *before* conducting the research, however. I tried to be aware of myself as researcher and the impact my own conscious or unconscious assumptions have on my work throughout the research process. During interviews, I monitored my own experience of the participants and the interview process. I reflected on my own 'countertransference' responses to the interview process with each participant, and included a discussion of these responses alongside my presentation of each interview in the "Data Presentation and Analysis" chapter.

I watched for my assumptions prior to conducting the research to emerge in both the interviews themselves and in my presentation of my findings. As I completed my project, I again reflected on my own perspective in conducting and presenting my

research. To the extent that I was able, I made explicit the ways in which my presuppositions shaped my finished project, making clear that what I presented is one perspective on the issue. I attempted to point to those aspects of the experience of identity and relationships in online gaming that my perspective has helped to elucidate, as well as areas or possibilities that, because of the limits of my personal approach, remain unexplored.

Method for this study

To learn more about Everquest players' particular experiences of the game, I chose to conduct interviews with current players, and to supplement these interviews with a game log. I solicited volunteers from a variety of Everquest-related online message boards. I met with three participants for one face-to-face interview, lasting one to two hours, in a private place that was convenient for the respondent, including a quiet coffeeshop close to his² workplace and a library study room. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. As I planned to do face-to-face interviews, I solicited only participants who lived within driving distance from my home. The length of interviews was flexible, with an eye to making the experience comfortable for respondents while gathering as much useful information as possible. Everquest provides a "logging" function that allows players to record the text in the game (both text produced as a function of engaging with the programmatic aspects of the game and "chat" text between players). Before our meeting, I asked the participants to log a gameplay session, which we reviewed during our interview as a concrete instance of the

² While it was my intention to solicit both male and female volunteers, I was only able to successfully arrange interviews with male participants. The participants were also alike in that they were all Caucasian and all played the same class of characters, primarily, the rogue. The homogeneity of my sample is a clear limitation to my study.

participant's online experience. Some volunteers asked me for more specific instruction about what they should log (i.e., guild raids,³ playing with pick-up groups,⁴ or something else). I asked each of them to log whatever type of play he enjoyed most. Each participant brought his logged session on disk.

In my interviews with respondents, I hoped to cover several relevant areas. First, I inquired about how the participant was introduced to the game, and its role in his life now. I also explored the player's experience of his relationship to his Everquest character(s), the significance of the character(s) to the player, and any similarities or differences the player experiences between himself and his character(s). I also asked about the participant's experience of others when online, particularly during the logged session. What were the player's thoughts and feelings related to the interactions in which his character was involved? Can the player do anything interpersonally online that he cannot offline? Finally, I hoped to learn about any particular friendships or close relationships the participant had with others in Everquest. How does this person encounter his or her friends online? How are their relationships different from or similar to offline friendships or relationships the participant might have? (See Appendix 4, Interview Guide.)

In all of these lines of inquiry, it was my goal to get as much of a concrete, specific description as possible of my participants' experiences of Everquest and to engage them in conversation about these experiences. To this end, I requested detailed stories of my participants' experiences and incorporated the logged gameplay session into

³ An organized activity in which members of the same guild, an Everquest community, come together to fight a particular monster or complete a particular quest.

⁴ Pick-up groups are composed of players who may or may not know each other or be part of the same guild, who get together for spontaneous fighting.

our discussion as much as possible. I also tried to allow for flexibility in my interview style, rather than adhering to a rigid interview structure. I hoped the participants would feel free to share with me what felt most important to them about their online experience. Weiss (1994) explained that when we move away from a more structured approach toward “tailoring our interview to each respondent, we gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides” (p.3). In this way, I hoped to expand on (and perhaps nuance) the findings of more quantitative research that has been done in the area, first by illuminating in more detail the particular experiences of heavy internet users in Everquest, and second, by exploring those aspects of heavy internet use which elude the grasp of more quantitative studies. Banister, et.al. (1994) explained that qualitative “interviews can permit exploration of issues that may be too complex to investigate through quantitative means. That is, given the latter’s aim to simplify phenomena, they can misrepresent the nature of the questions under investigation” (p.50). I strove to explore heavy internet use through Everquest while allowing for the rich contradictions, paradoxes, and difficulties that emerge in personal accounts.

These interviews were transcribed (see Appendices 7-9) and reviewed. As part of the handling phase of analysis, I read and re-read these transcripts in an attempt to gain a careful understanding of each participant’s experience. My understanding of the kind of conversation the participants and I were having sometimes changed on re-reading the interview, and I noted these changes in a separate section of the data presentation and analysis for each participant. Moving toward sense-making, I then organized the transcribed interviews in a manner that Banister and colleagues (1994) called a thematic analysis, in which the research material is “organized under thematic headings in ways

that attempt to do justice both to the elements of the research question and the preoccupations of the interviewees” (p.57). In making sense of the material I gathered, my interview questions served as one means of organizing my responses, however each participant influenced the direction of the interview by pursuing his own particular areas of interest or experience. In order to understand the themes that spanned across all three of my interviews, I recapitulated the process of handling and sense-making, taking all three interviews together as my focus. I began by attempting to piece together the important points of my experience with individual participants. I examined each interview individually and brought together related material, a process Weiss (1994) called “coding” and “sorting” and Wertz (1984) might understand as “relating constituents” and “conceptually guided interrogation. With excerpts from the interview organized according to themes that arose in the dialogue between myself and the participants which was guided by my interview questions, I composed a narrative that summarized my understanding of my interactions with each participant.

Having considered the interviews separately and having organized them with an eye toward themes discussed in each, I proceeded to examine the thematically organized material across interviews. I attempted to make sense of what my participants told me in their own terms, while being informed by the existing literature on the subject. For each theme I identified, I tried to understand what I had learned about online interactions from my interviews and to reconcile my findings with those of others in the field and with relevant theoretical work. Thus I completed the sense-making tasks of conceptually guided interrogation and psychological languaging, bringing my understanding of my

experience with the participants into dialogue with the relevant literature and my research questions.

In this final step, I also considered my own reactions to the experience of the research, and the ways in which the findings did or did not meet my expectations at the beginning of the study. These reflections on the research may be found in the Discussion chapter under the heading “Questions for further research and limitations of this study.”

Questions that guided analysis

In approaching my interview transcripts and game logs, I bore in mind the questions from my interview guide, whether or not I actually asked them. Because I attempted to let my volunteers participate in directing the interview, I did not ask all the questions in my guide to all interviewees. Reflecting on the finished interviews, however, I often found that I had been given material that was relevant to the questions I was unable to ask. I also considered in the analysis topics that I was unable to ask participants about directly, but about which I nonetheless hoped to learn. For example, the game logs sometimes allowed me to explore tensions in the players’ description of their experience of the game in a way that might be less accessible to direct questioning.

One of my primary concerns was the players’ own sense of what makes the game interesting and specifically what draws them to spend a significant portion of their time playing. I entered this project with the assumption that their own sense of identity online and their relationships with others through the game were central to its appeal, however I

wanted to remain open to the player's own sense of the experiences he was seeking by logging on.

Following on my question of what draws the participants to the game, I wondered about differences they perceived between Everquest and offline life. Another of my presumptions beginning the project was that players enjoyed the game because it offered them some novel experience – something different in some way from their everyday lives, and that this difference was important to their decision to sacrifice offline experiences for online ones. I wanted very much to understand what opportunities Everquest allowed my participants that their daily, offline lives did not. In particular, I wanted to understand differences and similarities between their online and offline conceptions of their own identity and between their online and offline relationships. How could the participants relate to others, and how did others respond to them differently in Everquest? Were there any places that the online and offline self or other intersected?

In looking at the logged gameplay particularly, I was interested first in the situation that the player chose to log. My instructions to players on what they should log was deliberately vague, assuming that their selection of scenarios to log might indicate something of what the players valued about the game. Next, I thought about the particular conversations going on around the player (whether in guild or group chat⁵) and considered how the player took part in them. Finally, I recalled the player's characterization of himself during our interview and looked for instances that seemed to either illustrate or contradict his self-description.

⁵ Players read and use several types of chat – some can only be seen by members of one's group or guild, regardless of the characters' locations in the Everquest world, while other forms of chat are 'audible' to any character nearby.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Chapter 4

In this section I will first present portions of the transcribed interviews, data from the logged gameplay sessions⁶, and my reflections on my experience with each participant. I have organized the presentation of individual cases by themes which seemed to capture the narrative that was unfolding in our conversation, however I cannot claim that this narrative was created solely by the participants. As Walsh (2004) wrote, “to call an interview nondirective is to ignore the researcher’s unique and dynamic role in co-constituting the conversations with participants” (p.115). In telling me about their experience, the participants were telling a story to me, shaped by my presence and my questions. My participants arrived at these themes together, and just as I cannot remove my hand from their creation in conversation, I cannot remove myself from the process of selecting, organizing, and presenting the interview material. I have included some lengthy quotations in the participant’s own words to maximize their presence in the research, but what follows is necessarily both data presentation and interpretive analysis.⁷ The individual narratives represent the situated structure of each participant’s experience of the game.

After spending some time with each individual interview and considering the main points that stood out to me, I considered the three interviews together, and in light of each other. Following the individual analyses, I present an across-interview analysis, in which I brought together themes or concerns common to all three interviews to describe a general structure of my participants’ narratives and I explore commonalities

⁶ I have chosen not to include quotations from the game logs. Please see Appendix 6 for an explanation of this decision and an example of quoted log text.

⁷ For complete interview transcripts, please see Appendices 7-9.

and differences in each participant's approach to or experience of these common elements.

N interview analysis

N is a 20-year-old Caucasian man who works at a coffee shop and is attending college. N was difficult to schedule an interview with, as he called to reschedule twice before we met in person. Compared to my other two participants, N spoke less freely, seldom using my questions as a starting point to discuss other topics as the others sometimes did, and at times would reject my requests for elaboration. Nonetheless, N did answer most of my questions and reported enjoying the chance to talk about the game. N had played Everquest for several years, but at the time of our interview had not played since he began classes that semester, several months before.

Introduction to the game

N reported that before Everquest was released, he enjoyed role-playing through an online message board. Though he did not start playing as soon as the game started out, he saw the game as an extension of something he already enjoyed:

Um, let's see, about five years ago, just before it actually came out, I was, yeah I wasn't in the beta or anything like that. But, a bunch of friends of mine online – I was involved in an online gaming community. So a lot of people – the buzz started going around, ohh – Everquest, Everquest. And, it came out in April, some of them bought it. And it took until Christmas before I got around to it, and yeah. I got into it.

I'd been playing console RPGs⁸ for a while, and it made sense, you know, I like playing RPGs, I like playing with other people, let's play RPGs together.

Commenting on what kept him playing the game for five years, N said:

⁸ Role Playing Games

Well, sometimes you see it as a bad relationship – you don't know why you're still in it, but something keeps drawing you back! But I do enjoy the game. Sometimes it's hard to find things to do. Honestly I think it's tradeskills⁹ that really bring me back every now and again. Like, oh this looks tough, there's nobody to group with – why don't I go bake?

Um hm. So, can you expand on the bad relationship metaphor? How so? *It's an intangible. You don't know why you're still with it. There's just something about the game. You know, the person to extend the metaphor – you just don't wanna let go. Probably there are memories to when there was a golden time. I remember the good old days of EQ.*

The changing game landscape

N reported that the game had changed a lot lately, and for the most part he felt the changes were for the worse. To continue his relationship metaphor, I inquired about what made the “good old days” good:

Boats.

And what was so good about boats?

Nothing.

(laugh) so what makes them the good old days?

It was, it was a group atmosphere I guess. There was a sense of camaraderie with people that you needed to sit there, wait for the boat, you know, by the time boats finally came out, it was like, 40 minute boat ride from anywhere to Kunark, and you were sitting there. And one person is like, I've gotta go AFK, watch my back. Cause, you got all the PvPers¹⁰ everywhere else. That's when that area of the world was still kinda hopping¹¹.

It was unclear whether N was responding minimally to my questions for dramatic emphasis, or out of a reluctance to talk more about his experience. Nonetheless, he did point to a sense of “camaraderie” as being important in the good old days, which

⁹ Skills within the game that characters can master that are not directly concerned with combat, such as baking, sewing, brewing, fletching, and jewelry-making.

¹⁰ PvP stands for player versus player. One must choose a server on which to play Everquest, and most servers do not allow players to harm other players' characters; combat is primarily between groups of players and computer-generated content. On N's server, however, players are allowed to harm each other. Therefore, N and other players are usually on guard against attacks from other “PVPers.” Of the three participants, N is the only one who plays on a PVP server.

¹¹ Kunark, Lost Dungeons of Norrath, and Luclin are all game expansions that add new areas and monsters to the Everquest world. After each new expansion is released, the new areas of the world are usually “kinda hopping,” as N mentions here.

involved spending time in the game getting to know strangers while waiting for some in-game event to occur. One component of this camaraderie seems to involve protecting others who are waiting with him from being attacked by other players. One of the positive changes N spoke about in the game was an expansion that put more emphasis on working together and watching out for other players:

Yeah. Lost Dungeons of Norrath, that came out and that was like a real call back to the good days. You know you get together with a couple of people, you do something. It's kind of an intense atmosphere. It brings you back to the days, waiting for the boat, you know, watch my back. Everybody's gotta be constantly watching for everyone else.

N seemed to enjoy being thrown together with other players and depending on each other in potentially dangerous situations. N spoke more about enjoying the waiting with others, even when the threat of danger was lower:

And even when Luclin came out, you had the spires¹², you're still waiting. And it's not so much you needed people, which you did, but you wanted people around. Tells can only get you so far.

It was important to N that players were near each other while talking. N drew an interesting distinction here, as a particular form of chat – tells - allows players to converse with other players no matter where they are in the Everquest world. One actually need not be near the other person in the game world in order to talk with him or her. I asked him about how talking in tells was different from talking with someone who was next to him in-game, given that in both cases, the other player is actually very far away from him:

I don't know, it just is. You can be on the other side of the world and use tells and that's fun, but you can't go terrorize a little village of green MOBs¹³ over tells. It just happens.

¹² Another mode of transportation that required waiting in a certain spot to be teleported to another area of the world.

Players near each other in-game can join together to collaborate on in-game tasks, such as killing MOBs. N also mentioned that it mattered to him “that you can see the representation of the other person. That you can hang out with the representation of the other person.” I inquired more about the importance of the representation of others, and of himself, which prompted him to recall other changes in the game that he disliked:

Um, it’s become a little easier to get an appearance over the years with the new models and everything. And the dark elf, I’m a rogue, hewn [armor] doesn’t look all that well on dark elves. Personally, I mean, it’s gotten better over the years, but he still looks so homeless. You have your patchwork, and then wow, I’ve got my first suit of banded, and it looks awful on so many different levels – it’s brown over here and it’s red on your legs. And your hat if you had a hat was awful. This is back in the fledgling days when you were lucky to have one.

There’s sort of a self-consciousness about...

A little bit

...the ugly armor. It matters what you’re wearing... it does.

...when other people are sitting there, seeing you.

It matters, but you can get around it. The new models, with the new dye system, anybody with a couple bucks in their pocket can look any way they want. You know, that kinda takes away from it.

Hm. It’s also a matter of pride.

I earned the armor that eventually did look right all together.

In Everquest, different types of armor change the appearance of the character. N remembered starting out with his first set of armor looking awkward and in colors he did not like, but felt proud when he was able to get matching, good-looking armor. His character’s appearance communicated something about his experience and status in the game. Nonetheless, N said, his character still looks “homeless” despite the improvements in the graphics used to represent the characters (the “new models”). This was one of many times N pointed to the limitations of his character within the game and

¹³ MOB is short for “mobile object,” a term describing any computer-generated object that moves. It is used to refer to any monster that players might attack. “Green” refers to the relative toughness of the mob. Players have the ability to “consider” a MOB in order to get a reading on how relatively tough it would be to kill. The MOBs are rated on a color scale, with green being the easiest to kill.

his frustrations with them. Finally, he pointed out another change from the “good old days”; “the new dye system” which allows players to easily change the appearance of their character by changing the color of their armor. Whereas N had to work within the game to “earn” a different look for his character through challenging game experiences, now players can do so simply by paying for dye. N’s character’s appearance no longer speaks to his status as it used to. Nonetheless, N did see some positive changes in the newer ability to customize one’s character’s face and hair, and to earn “titles” through game experience:

Nowadays, I like how my rogue looks now. With the new models, you can fix the hair and everything. He’s bald. He’s got a little goatee....And with the new title system he’s very much become a swashbuckler.

In-game, the title “swashbuckler” is displayed above N’s character, along with his name. This new change seems to be an alternate way of visually marking one’s in-game status in the way that his armor used to.

Continuing along the theme of having and deserving in-game, and of his character’s limitations, N talked about the impact of a change in the game that allowed characters to travel around the game world more freely, without having to wait for transportation such as boats:

The atmosphere has really changed on those servers with Planes of Power coming out you can get anywhere from anywhere. Camping¹⁴ becomes, well, fun if you’ve got the gear to do it. Not so fun if you’re the one who has to scramble and find all the transportation.

So, how has that changed the attitude, like your attitude toward the game, or others? Well, if I played a class that was really good at PvP in the first place I’d say I’m getting kind of screwed here – this isn’t as much fun. But, I see two roles as the

¹⁴ Camping refers to sitting in the spot where a monster is programmed to appear and killing it when it does. Players “camp” a monster they need to kill to complete a quest, get a special item the monster has, or gain experience and increase in levels. N here is expressing disappointment that camping certain monsters is more difficult for him.

PvP rogue. One, is you know, your PvE¹⁵ experience, when you go out, on a raid¹⁶ or whatever. And in PvP, if it's mass PvP I stay in the shadows and pop out, I stab someone and I sneak back. If it's solo, I run. There's no other way, you just run.

Here N pointed out a change with which he is unhappy, seeming to say that making transportation more widely available has hurt some but benefited others. When I asked him about the impact of this change on his own experience of the game, N returned to the limitations of his own character, implying that he was never “really good at PvP in the first place” and thus is not “screwed” by the change. He pointed out ways he can contribute to a group in-game, either playing against non-player monsters or against other players, but ended with his ineffectiveness fighting alone. N needs allies in the game, he implied, because he is powerless to fight others by himself. At another point in the interview, N pointed out again the kinds of support a character needs to be successful in the game:

It's become much more of a guild¹⁷ oriented game. You really need to, I don't know how it is on other servers, but on Vallon you need a guild to survive. If you don't have the friends and if you don't have the gear, you're dead in the water.

N seemed to have ambivalent feelings about needing the help of others; while he enjoyed the camaraderie of playing with others, he seemed somewhat resentful that his character could not do more on his own.

Another theme in N's discussion of the “good old days” of Everquest was his being part of a role-playing guild. He described the experience:

¹⁵ Player versus environment – this term refers to players fighting “MOBs,” or computer-generated monsters, as opposed to fighting other players.

¹⁶ Raids are efforts by a large group of people to kill a particular monster or group of monsters. Raids are typically organized by guilds.

¹⁷ A guild is a group of 10 or more players who regularly play together and who share a special kind of text chat that only guild members can see, called guild chat or guildspeak. The name of the guild one belongs to is typically displayed above the character's head, along with the character's name.

The first, I'd say, year or so, the first year on the new server I fell into sorts with a bunch of role-players, you know, we were in a role-playing guild. That was really the good old days, really put a face on that. You know, Kunark was new. I met these people, they were out in Lavastorm, cause we were all the dark folk, back when being dark was cool. Cause it's not anymore.

Here N referred to his character, a dark elf, being part of an “evil race” in the Everquest world. I asked N to explain more about how being dark is not cool anymore:

It was team PvP, and it used to be the darkies versus everyone else. Which was fun for a while, but then PvE got so hard that you'd need a bard and things just kind of broke down. But back in the day it was cool to be dark, pure dark, and I met all these people and we hung out a bit, for like a couple of weeks. I remember running in and out of Lavastorm and getting our asses whipped from something that got pulled¹⁸ from one of the goblin camps. And we're like, you know what? Kunark's new, let's go over there, and we hung out in the Field of Bone for a while, moved up to Kurn's Tower. Just that progression that you can really remember everything that you went through. The people that you were there with. And yeah, it was role-playing for a while. And I ended up having an online marriage.

It seems that part of the dark characters being cool involved their position with respect to all others in the game – they were “the darkies versus everyone else.” N was part of a small group united against the rest of the Everquest world. As part of this select group, he remembered travelling across the Everquest world together, feeling closely connected with the others in his guild. As a particular example of a memorable role-playing moment, he mentioned getting married to another person in his guild. When I asked for elaboration, N told me about the in-game details of the wedding:

We didn't get a GM involved, but we had enough friends, that we had the jeweler. I was actually the jeweler. I made the rings. I made the alcohol. Friend of mine made the food. Another friend of ours made a set of black armor that we could wear just to look nice.

The wedding was a gathering of online friends, though he notes the marriage was not “sanctioned” by the presence of a GM or game master, a sort of representative of the

¹⁸ “Pulling” refers to attracting a monster’s attention and bringing it back to where the rest of one’s group of players is waiting to attack it.

game's creators and managers. N's description of the wedding and the events that led up to it tended to focus on within-game experiences, rather than his own experience as a player. He described becoming interested in a wedding when he stumbled onto one in-game and it seemed like a good time. Listening to his description of his relationship with his Everquest bride, it was difficult to differentiate between the "role-play" of being in-game together and his personal relationship as it was established through the game:

I don't know. It was just me and this other person, she lives in Toronto. We've since become good friends. We've kind of dropped the role-play aspect. And we're just friends now. But uh, we just hung out so much, and that was the first thing either of us would do when we got on. Is he on? Is she on? Let's go kill something. And before long it was, is he on? Is she on? Let's go tradeskill. Let's go hang out. Let's go just chat. You know, it didn't matter if you were doing anything. That could've been in tells. Doesn't necessarily have to be in group. And things just moved along.

And at the time, did you know the player behind the character?

No. this is strictly in-game.

And you would never talk about your life outside.

Oh yeah, we did. I mean, not in any great depth, but you know, here and there. Not so much problem sharing, but you know, good things that go on. And venting, oh I hate my job, etc. Chill out, let's go kill a goblin.

N was particularly vague about how he and this player in particular decided to be married in Everquest – "things just moved along." He mentioned that the nature of their relationship has changed over time, with them becoming "good friends" after being married in Everquest. I was particularly interested in this shift in relationship – between a role play between characters to a friendship between players – and how the two were blended in his experience playing the game. N seemed particularly protective of this information, however, and when I asked how he would describe the experience of getting married to someone who did not know anything about the game, he replied:

I probably wouldn't. Because it's a difficult thing to explain to someone who doesn't play. Even for somebody who's new to the game, because it's such a

different game from what it was back when the game first started. There is no role-play aspect anymore.

N seemed to indicate that the context that would make his experience understandable is lost, and was reluctant to disclose.

While N mentioned several changes in the game that he disliked, he clearly missed the game and the people he knew through it. He explained:

Yeah. I'm not happy with the way it's gone and that's only compounded by the fact that I haven't been in it to go with it. And I, I can adapt, I can change. I've been doing a pretty good job of it thus far, but, I haven't been. So it's gotten kind of out of my hands.

Despite his longing for the “good old days” when players depended on each other more and role-playing was more prevalent, N still wished he could play more than he does and felt regret that the game seems to have left him behind.

N also talked about the sense of loss he had when other players drift out of the game. He described the way his guild moved from role-playing most of the time to speaking “out of character” more of the time as a sort of loss of the relationships:

It deteriorated. I mean, nothing bad really happened, it just kind of faded before long and became more and more out of character and then in character was the break from the norm. She started coming online less and less. She's since re-emerged and we're actually in the same guild again. But, it was a slow fade.

Simultaneous with the guild ‘fading out,’ N’s Everquest wife began to play less and less.

D made several other comments over the course of the interview about his longing for his old role-playing guild:

It seems to be a very lonely server nowadays.

You meet your new people, but, you still pine for the old days, and very few people are around.

N described his interactions with friends lately, as they wonder about lost friends:

They've all stopped playing. Very often I'll get together with the friends that I do have now, not the ones that I've met, and just go, "where has everybody gone?" so many people have just dropped off the face of the fictitious planet that we inhabit.

N here expressed a strong sense of loss, and later a sense of helplessness in the face of that loss, when people he knew stopped playing the game:

You remember just doing things with these people. And they're just not around anymore. It's almost like they died. You have no contact with them anymore, you'd never know, that they were alive.

N explained how difficult it would be to try to find a friend from Everquest outside of the game, compared to finding old friends he knew from other contexts with whom he had fallen out of contact:

There's always ways to track people down that you knew from school, that fell away. You can always find them again. I don't know where to start looking for, you know, Bob from the Cazic server. He could be anyone, anywhere.

In a way, it seems that the loss of a friend in Everquest highlights all one did not know about that friend. However real or strong N's connection with an online friend felt while that person was still playing the game, when a player leaves, the connection is ephemeral, something that cannot possibly be sustained without Everquest.

Relatedness in Everquest

In terms of his own persona in-game, N reported that his character was very much like himself. He described the process of creating his character:

Yeah I don't know what drew me, it just did. And then I ended up drawing up, you know, my own kind of a personality. I drew up a little bit of fiction as a history, and it just fell into place I guess. There was no real personality about it, so, pick your own.

I inquired more about whether the personality N chose for his characters was like himself, or very different, to which he gave a minimal answer:

Mostly.

Mostly?

They're very loose with their words, I suppose. I shoot my mouth off a bit here and there. (laughs) um, and they're very sarcastic kinds of characters, kind of people. You know, people like me. And, yeah, a lot of my character is a lot of me. And sure there are differences.

N talked through his characters in much the same way he interacts outside of Everquest.

This assertion might seem strange, considering that his most fond memories of Everquest involve role-playing with guild members. For N, it seemed that role-playing does not necessarily require interacting differently than one would every day. Throughout the interview, N's descriptions of "role-play" in his interactions with other players were very complex and difficult to tease apart from non-role-play interactions. For example, N explained that he became interested in Everquest through an online, chat-based role-playing group of which he was a member. He described the way they role-played in Everquest by falling back on the characters they had been role-playing in the group before:

It tends to be ah, a little bit – it had gotten to the point where we weren't really role playing the characters that we were, but the characters that we all knew, like from the old community. Everybody knew who everybody was. They didn't necessarily have the same names, but we all knew, that's him, that's her, that's him. And we just went about our usual weekly chat sort of business only all the time... we all knew each other as on old soul I suppose.

In this passage particularly, one wonders if the 'old souls' N knew were the Everquest characters, the chat-based role playing characters, or the players themselves, or how much each of these were one and the same.

Asked about the differences between N's everyday persona and his Everquest character, he answered in a somewhat evasive way:

I don't have nearly as many knives as my rogue is wielding. (laughs) I do have a collection that I've amassed over the years. I'd probably say Everquest spurred me on to that...rather than having them made me decide to make me into a rogue.

N seemed to be moving away from a discussion about his experience of himself online and off and to more material differences. N at first seemed to draw the simple distinction that his rogue is a fantasy character who lives in a world in which wielding lots of knives is expected, whereas N is real and lives in a world where “rogue” behavior is not so accepted. He later pointed out, however, that some Everquest-related interests, such as knives (and later he mentions tradeskills) have crossed over the fantasy line and become offline interests.

N reported that he did not play Everquest with people he knew from offline life, but his positive memories about the “good old days” in the role-playing guild and his Everquest marriage seem to indicate that online relationships significantly contributed to his enjoyment of the game. In response to my question about whether talking to friends he knew through Everquest is different from talking to other people he knows face-to-face, N replied:

I'd say it's almost better. I'd put them on the level of an acquaintance from school. Some of them I wouldn't really go out of my way to hang with but yeah, I'll talk to them online. But then there's the added bonus of knowing Everquest. It's a common tie, I suppose.

N's response is a bit cryptic here; talking with Everquest friends is like talking to an acquaintance, but he also mentioned it is “almost better” than some other kind of interaction. N seemed to be putting a positive spin on Everquest relationships here, but to say that a relationship is on a par with an acquaintance he would not “go out of [his] way to hang with” is hardly a glowing evaluation.

In terms of his style of interaction within the game, N noted a particular difference when talking with others in Everquest:

It's more goal-oriented conversation I suppose, about doing things, even if you're not actually moving.

This goal-oriented nature of conversations seemed to facilitate N's meeting strangers within the game more easily than he could offline. He explained:

I'm probably much more prone to meeting people, to actually putting myself out there and meeting new people in-game than I am in real life. Like I like having friends in real life, I like knowing people, I don't like that first step of actually having to get to them. But it doesn't seem to be a hurdle in-game...Then it's just as easy as an LFG tag away. Go, meet someone, look for a group, you find someone. Once you click, you click. If not, there's always another group. Usually. Maybe.

An LFG (looking for group) tag, which appears above N's character, along with the character's name, facilitates his approaching others who are also looking for a group to accomplish some in-game task together. The LFG tag facilitated N initiating conversations with other players about goals he would like help in accomplishing in-game. As opposed to face-to-face conversation, in which there is no ready indicator that someone might be open to conversation and no guide as to what might be a fruitful topic, the goal-oriented nature of Everquest interactions means: "there's no mystery about it. You know what people are gonna come to you for."

N noted another way in which he can make meeting others easier and lower the risk of rejection in-game:

But we don't ask people. Generally I don't ask people, you know, "would you like to group? Can I join you?" I mean, I don't know if other people do that, but generally speaking, I put out a shout,¹⁹ people respond.

¹⁹ A "shout" is a kind of text chat that can be read by any players in your vicinity in the Everquest world. Players typically use shouts to look for a group or for help from others.

Even though, in general, players might be looking for the same sorts of contacts, N did not have to approach people directly to begin an interaction – he could advertise himself, in effect, and receive only interested responses. N joked about the lack of an equivalent means of meeting people in the offline world by pointing out that he could not very easily use a loudspeaker to invite someone to come talk with him about a particular range of topics.

While N was able to meet people by initially focusing on a narrow range of conversational topics – namely his current objective within the game – he reported that in general, he felt able to talk freely with others:

Um, I'm probably a little more open on Everquest. There is no real personal aspect unless you give it one. Unless you put yourself out there. I'd say I'm probably a little more outspoken in-game.

When I asked for an example of a time he was able to say something online that he might not have offline, he reported that he could not remember any examples, saying, “*No, not really. Just kinda, kinda melts together after a while.*”

While N reported that he enjoyed being more open in-game, he also said he preferred conversations that he could easily get out of if he so chose. I had noticed from N's logged gameplay session that he maintained many active chat channels while playing, even though he engaged in relatively little conversation on these channels. He described his favorite chat channels:

There's a lot of conversation going on in serverwide and the ring. So it's easy to jump right in, you know, throw in your two cents and not really have to get dragged into a conversation.

N said he seldom got “dragged into a conversation,” and happily told me about his strategies for handling such situations when they do arise:

“sorry I went linkdead!²⁰ We’ll talk later I guess.” There’s always always always linkdead...And when you’re talking over chat channels or inter-server tells, they don’t always get through, due to zoning...I’m a rogue – I’m sneaky like that.

Managing interactions across media

In keeping with his preference to jump in and out of conversations in Everquest, N described a play style that frequently involved simultaneously participating in interactions with people outside of the game. N recalled playing Everquest while spending time with friends in his dormitory:

A couple of years ago, my first year in college, which probably contributed to low marks, I played almost nightly. I was on a floor where all my friends were, and the most we tended to do was sit around, watch movies, and eat pizza. And that all took place on the TV, so I’m over here watching the movie and playing the game.

N described this kind of situation as “dual socialness” in that he was interacting with online and offline friends at once. He reported often playing like this for two to three hours on weeknights, longer on the weekends, and explained that he suspected spending such time on the game was at least partially responsible for his poor grades that year, which led to his temporary suspension from school. N reported that since returning to his school, he participates in “dual socialness” less because he often uses his computer to watch DVDs with friends and cannot play Everquest at the same time. He also admitted that he had made “a bit of a conscious decision” not to play as much.

Just as other participants pointed out that Everquest can be a source of friction in relationships, N reported that his girlfriend was not supportive of his playing:

She doesn’t have much of an attitude towards the game because she doesn’t like the idea of it. She doesn’t like the idea of me playing, I don’t know if she doesn’t like the idea of me playing with other people, or she doesn’t like the idea of her

²⁰ A player goes linkdead when he or she loses her connection to the Everquest server. This usually happens with little warning, hence N’s ability to use it as an easy escape from conversations.

playing with other people and she's like, "that's weird, why do you do it?" it's just gotten to the point where I don't talk to her about it. It's not worth the hassle on either of our parts.

Beyond the "dual socialness" N described, he understood his girlfriend as being put off by the number of people who are virtually present when he logs on to Everquest. N explained:

She just doesn't like – she's not very extroverted. She doesn't like a lot of people, knowing a lot of people at once, I suppose. And she thinks that's really weird.

N explained that he thinks of himself as "interacting with a lot of people" when he plays, and implies that his girlfriend not only does not like this herself, but has a difficult time understanding N's desire to engage in such an activity. N explained how, when he played more regularly, he attempted to balance Everquest and his girlfriend:

Um, we live a good distance away, so we're not together 24-7. And uh, with the advantage of programs coming out like EQ windows where you can actually tab in and out²¹, so one window is EQ and the other is AIM²² and I'm still keeping up with her...(dramatically) She's just another tell!

Running Everquest and an instant messaging program at once allows N to chat with other players and with his girlfriend in much the same fashion – thus her becoming "just another tell." Like when he played Everquest while watching movies with his dorm-mates, N seemed to have become proficient at switching between online and offline contexts in relationships. He explained how he is able to make the switch easily:

Back when we were roleplaying and everything, it probably would've been hard going back and forth, but A. the technology didn't exist, and B. neither did my girlfriend. So as we've become more advanced and we can just tab in and out, we're just people playing games now and we know that, and it's not so hard. We can just switch over and talk.

²¹ Previously, one was unable to see other items on the desktop while playing Everquest. N is referring to programs that allow one to run Everquest in a window while running other programs, such as instant messaging programs, simultaneously.

²² America-Online Instant Messenger

N's switch to "we" here might imply that, in his experience, other players also enjoy easily blurring the lines, or switching back and forth between online and offline relationships. He also seemed to imply here that the advance of technology, making switching back and forth between the game and other activities easier, has contributed to the movement from role-play to "just people playing games." Nonetheless, N explained the importance of having some separation between Everquest and non-Everquest relationships:

That would've been kind of, that would be one of the worst things ever if they could integrate AIM or MSN or Yahoo into tells. Like they do server-wide.

Why would it?

Because the probability of a mis-tell is terrible. Then you have to explain it. It doesn't matter if you're talking about killing a dragon, or other more risqué topics, you're still going to have to explain something, here and there, and it's just not worth the hassle.

The current separation of game and outside life provides important protection from inappropriate game-related interactions from slipping into other contexts. Interestingly, N used the word "mis-tell" here, part of the Everquest language that refers to within-game miscommunication – accidentally sending a message to someone other than its intended recipient. N implied that between-context mis-tells would have more dire consequences than within-game mis-tells.

N also experienced a kind of "dual socialness" or a blurring of the lines between Everquest and non-Everquest interactions when he attended a convention geared specifically toward players. N was very positive about his experience at the Fan Faire as he described interacting with the others there:

If you have the opportunity I would really suggest it, even if you don't play that much anymore, just to be with people that, you know, know the game and it's a lot of fun. Like they did this live quest, they had all these Sony employees lined up, you know, all over the place, down the plaza. And you'd go to one and you'd be

like, “Hail.” And they’d be like “I have this quest for you.” I’m like “sure, why not, this is what we’re doing, isn’t it?” you know, you have to run to the other side, hail another ‘NPC’²³ and they’d give you something, bring it back, you know, fetch quests. We had this guy that was in our, you know, we had to group up. And this guy that was in our group, he was a ranger. You could tell he was a ranger because he had this really earthy looking vest on and a rather large bow.

Also a Sony employee?

No.

Oh?

This was a Fan Faire guy.

Okay.

So, he had, he was like “oh, I’ll track shit down.” So he came back 10 minutes later, we were on a fetch quest for a baking person. He ran to the Ben & Jerry’s – god knows where it is – and he comes back with a little cup of chocolate syrup, and a cup of walnuts. I don’t know where he went to get this stuff, I can’t even think of, where is there a Ben & Jerry’s in relativity? To the Plaza? But you know, he came back. I don’t think we ended up finishing that one, we were missing butter or something, and no one really wanted to go out and get it. But, yeah that was a lot of fun.

At the Fan Faire, N saw other people in terms of their class – a ranger would wear “earthy looking” clothes and carry a bow. The attendees took on their in-game character as a means of interacting with others face to face. In-game personas seemed to become out-of-game personas, as N illustrated when he told another story about falling and hurting his ankle at the convention:

I fell to the ground and probably called for a cleric. Because it seemed the prudent thing to do.

N reported that he met a wide variety of people at the Fan Faire and was a bit surprised at how diverse the crowd was. While he seemed to feel that the attendee’s taking on their in-game characters made the experience better, he said he found it “weird” meeting people who lived close to him:

And it was kinda weird to meet someone that you know in-game, but it was even more weird to meet someone you know in-game and know that, you know, they live down the street.

²³ Non-player character, or a character that is programmed by the game, rather than being controlled by a player. In this context, the “NPCs” were Sony employees, rather than Fan Faire attendees.

How is it weird?
I don't know, it's just one of those things like, wow, you know, people play, you know, I'm near these people.

Limitations of his character

Another theme that ran throughout my interview with N was the identity of powerlessness, or of being at a disadvantage within the game. In various contexts, N mentioned the limitations of his character and how ill-prepared he was to fight other characters. Frequently, N mentioned that his only choice when faced with a challenge was to run away:

And in PvP, if it's mass PvP I stay in the shadows and pop out, I stab someone and I sneak back. If it's solo, I run. There's no other way, you just run.

I can't – there's really not much I can do solo. I don't go out looking for trouble... yeah, generally speaking I don't look for trouble. It finds me.

N also described his role when fighting in a group of players disparagingly:

Every now and again the tank dies and you need to pick up the slack. Which is horrible. I can do it for at least 15 seconds. Pop "nimble," then that's gone, then you start running in circles. But, yeah, you've got a few tricks up your sleeve. And then, when everything falls apart, escape. The button, not my personal escaping skills, which I promise you are excellent! (laughs)

Despite feeling significantly limited in what his character can do, N also described running as one of the most fun things he did in the game:

Those are some of the best stories I have about my experiences in Everquest
Running?
Yeah. It's very in-character – the escape.

I used to like to just run. Now that the advent of all kinds of transportation, it's nice every now and again to just start at Freeport and race someone to Queynos. It's a slow process, but it's a good way to waste an hour or two. If you're going to be sitting there chatting, why not? Make a run of it.

N explained that, in addition to running for fun, to race across the virtual world, he enjoyed running away from others who are trying to fight him:

I can really tell you running, that is the most fun. Certainly the most entertaining thing I do as a rogue. Because there's not much else to do.

And it's fun, to run from[others]?

It's more fun than standing there and going, "you know what, I'm going to die. Send me back right now." It gives me a bit of a fighting chance. And I don't always get away, but, it happens.

While in this passage N discussed running as something that he enjoys out of necessity, he later told a story of running away from an adversary in which he felt proud of his ability to escape:

There was this monk, Time-geared²⁴, and I'm not even close to EP. I've got a couple of pieces of ornate, everything else is my own personal collection. Mostly bizarre gear at this point. So I'm in a camp and this monk shows up, we're on opposite teams, and he's on the guild's top server – server's top guild rather. And there's a bit of a gear disparity, not to mention skill. You've gotta be the best of the best to get into this. And he starts to beat on me and I'm like, "woah, that's a monk? I've never seen a monk do 400 damage, welcome to the Plane of Time." So I'm off like a shot. I run out a ways, circle back, get back into the camp, talk to the Magus, you know, one second I'm in Butcherblock, the next I'm in South Ro. And he follows. And then I'm in Everfrost and he follows. And I bounce between maybe ten camps before coming back to Butcherblock. And tanking my way from the camp, through the zoneline, to the book at Felwithe. And he's absolutely pissed. He starts sending me tells once I make it back to Plane of Knowledge, once my escape has been successful²⁵, and he's like "what the hell are you doing? Come back out here! I'm gonna kill you." I'm like no, you're not (laughing) I just made the way, that's my personal victory for the night.

N's character was far outmatched by this monk, but was still able to escape, which was a *personal* victory for N. He explained that it is rare that he can actually kill another character, but that he enjoys escaping from someone he cannot kill, as it is the only enjoyment available to him:

Like I said, as a PvP rogue, there really isn't much else I can do. I can hop up behind him, put on duelist, or one of the new assassin strike disciplines, you know,

²⁴ The Plane of Time is a zone with monsters who are very difficult to kill, but who provide excellent armor and weapons as rewards to players who do kill them. Here, N is explaining that this monk had much better armor and weapons than N's own. EP and "ornate" are other sorts of armor.

²⁵ All players are safe from one another in the Plane of Knowledge; N successfully escaped when he made it to this zone.

pop a backstab.²⁶ If they're not on the ground, or under ten [percent health] that I can start wailing on them and kill them, it's pretty much time to run. So it becomes almost a Tom and Jerry kind of thing. You know, you run in, you provoke the cat, and start going. Unless you can absolutely positively take him down with a frying pan... You realize after not long of playing that there's not much else you can do.

N's metaphor here about Tom and Jerry is an interesting one. Throughout his description of his character's limitations, he seemed to move between frustration or resentment that his character seems weak and has limited options, and that he likes doing the sorts of things he can do (such as escaping) and finds them enjoyably "in character." With his reference to Tom and Jerry, he could be implying that his character is so limited in his abilities that his attempts to fight are cartoonish. However, he might have been positively comparing his character with Jerry, who is a surprisingly capable adversary to Tom, even though he is only a mouse. N himself seems to vacillate between these two possibilities in his opinion of his character.

N's perception of his character as limited seemed to extend to feeling limited as a player, as he described when he talked about the new game expansions:

Well, if I played a class that was really good at PvP in the first place I'd say I'm getting kind of screwed here – this isn't as much fun.

As mentioned before, N in this quotation implied that he is not good at PvP, and so is not "getting kind of screwed," but seems to also imply that he was "kind of screwed" even before the recent changes in the game because of his limitations in PvP. N also talked about feeling "screwed" at the Fan Faire, when he attended a panel about tradeskills, an aspect of the game he enjoys:

I went to the tradeskill forum, which was great. Well, it wasn't really great. It was more of them telling you, you know, you're really pretty much screwed. They

²⁶ Special skills available to rogue characters.

really haven't had much love for the tradeskillers. Except for the new interface. Have you played with it?
[nodding no]
So great. So great.

Even though the new interface is “great,” N felt “screwed” by the game developers.

Game log

N emailed me his log, which was very long, beforehand, and had this to say about the extra length:

I think it was actually a two hour log. Was it, I think it was about an hour and a half or so, because I realized once an hour had passed I hadn't given you anything, that was all looking for a group (laughs).

He went on to explain the adventures of the group he found. In fact, the log N gave me was about two hours worth of play, which spanned over 100 pages of text. Interestingly, the first hour, which N thought of as not giving me anything, included much more interaction between players. N talked with his guild members, simultaneously trying to put together two kinds of groups, and jumped in and out of conversations on various chat channels. N joked and chatted with several people, all while participating in the sort of “goal-directed” conversations he spoke about in our interview – many of the conversations pertained to where he will meet other players and what they will do next. About an hour and twenty minutes into the log, N and some guild members formed a group and traveled to a place that is new to N to fight together. For the next thirty minutes, they chatted very minimally, and then only about things directly pertaining to the task at hand. After about thirty minutes of fighting, N’s character was killed, and afterward he made light jokes with his group members while asking about the possibility

of a resurrection²⁷ for his character. Shortly thereafter the log ended. N did not get any particular instruction about what should be included in the log, but apparently thought it more important that I see the fighting part of the gameplay and less important that I see him interacting with others while looking for a group, since he extended his logged time to include the fighting. It is especially interesting that N would feel the second part of the log was more important, since during his interview he said the “good old days” involved talking with others while waiting for things to happen in-game. Still, N guessed that showing me only the way he interacts with others would not be ‘giving me anything,’ and that seeing the action of killing monsters would be important to understanding his gaming experience.

My experience of the interview

As mentioned before, compared to my other participants, N seemed to speak less freely and spontaneously. Where others would elaborate on their points or provide examples without prompting, N would answer a question briefly, then wait for the next. For this reason, N’s interview was the most difficult for me. During the interview, I thought that N was being guarded around his experience of the game and feelings about his character. I perceived his answers to focus mostly on technical aspects of the game, such as whether his character was getting “screwed” or not by recent game expansions or rule changes, and less on his personal experience of playing. I even briefly considered trying to find another participant who might be more open to sharing his experience! It was not until later, when I began to look at the transcript closely, that I began to see that N had provided me with some rich information about how important in-game

²⁷ A resurrection is a spell that can be cast after a character has died to restore some of the experience points lost by the death.

relationships were to him, and how lonely he felt without them recently. I also became more interested in his feelings about his character, who he described at every turn as somehow disenfranchised, while at the same time asserting that he enjoyed the very things that limited him, such as the necessity of running from other players. While N's interview was certainly the most difficult for me to conduct, and perhaps the most difficult to analyze, in that it was only after spending some time with the transcript that I began to perceive possible meanings and tensions, it was fruitful in the end.

M interview analysis

I met M on his day off from work. He arrived at our meeting place early, and brought with him a new fiction book about Everquest to show me. M was tall, bald, and imposing in size, but friendly and pleasant to speak with. 32 years old and caucasian, M worked for a software company.

Being challenged in-game

Throughout M's interview, he referred to the "challenge" of the game and enjoying the efforts involved to meet this challenge with others. In discussing his introduction to the game, he mentioned feeling intrigued by the prospect of playing a more difficult class of character:

And, ah, my friend really knew a lot about the game, and he said, you know, there are different kinds of characters you can be, and a, you can be a cleric, a warrior, a wizard, yadda yadda yadda." And he said, "the kind of character that not a lot of people try to play is the rogue, because it is a tough character to play, and it's an interesting one." So, I said "sure, why not? Let's give it a try."

M explained that he modeled his Everquest character on a character from a series of books he enjoyed, and in doing so created a more challenging experience for himself:

You see the thing is, he's a hero, but he comes from a race that's evil. He himself is not. He is an outcast from the race because he's a good guy. So, that's kind of what I wanted, what I was going for when I created him. And it's interesting, because by choosing a sort of evil race, I had to overcome the fact that he was evil to be accepted in good places. So it was kinda neat. It was a lot of fun going to places where originally they'd say, ohh, dark elf! We will kill you because you're evil. And then, working faction²⁸ so that okay, now you can come on in.

Within the game, M worked to overcome the 'evil' of his character's race and to be accepted by the 'good' races.

*M also spoke about enjoying the challenge of working with a group of people to attain goals within the game, especially in that the game requires one to think strategically and problem-solve:
I have a different mindset when I'm in the game than when I'm, you know, doing anything else....And it's kinda neat, because...it's not like I start taking on a different persona, or anything like that, but it's like, well, "how's the best way to do this? What's the best way to handle the situation?" and what I like about Everquest so much is that it's not so much just go in there, hack and slash, it's tactics. It's thinking, it's working your way around problem-solving, and it's really interesting to do.*

In his logged gameplay session, M and a group of friends were trying to accomplish a task that was new to the game, which few people had done before. M talked about how new scenarios in the game were an interesting challenge, even when his group failed:

So that's one of the things I like a lot about it, it's a game where if you fail – and you're expected to fail – you can basically look at what you did wrong, and come back and try again. You know, no one event is ever going to be exactly 100% perfect, but you can always try and do as best you can.

M explained that the makers of the game are "trying to make it more challenging for you" with these new encounters in-game, and the fun is in learning how to overcome the challenge with others. He mentioned that some of his friends feel that the makers of the game were "dumbing down" Everquest by giving players easier access to certain items or

²⁸ Faction is a sort of within-game karma; non-player characters treat players differently (either attacking them or peaceably cooperating with them) depending on the sorts of actions they have taken in the game.

areas in the game, but he argued that the creators of Everquest are always trying to provide new challenges:

My personal view is, yeah they made it a little bit easier, because it was so hard for certain people. But they said okay, now that you've done this, here's the new challenge. Try, you know the Lost Dungeons of Norrath or Omens of War. Here's these new areas to go in and try and be the first to do. I don't think they dumbed it down so much as they opened the content up.

M also talked about the ways his guild tries to push themselves to make the game more challenging, while emphasizing that he enjoys working with others toward goals:

Everquest is one of the few remaining massively multiplayer online games that is player versus content, or environment. And I kinda like that, because I've never been one that says, let me go out there and kill this person. I don't wanna go out there and go after people – I wanna go after critters. I was talking with [a friend] about it, and he said, it's really good to be able to go out and be able to take out these two or three people, and kind of knock them down and brag a little once you're done. And I was like, that's not really what I'm all about. I'm more about taking on the challenge that's there, and see how we can do. Like, one of the things that we're famous for as a guild, is we will try and do an encounter with as few people as possible. Say the encounter says you need like, 54, well we'll try to do it with 50 or 45. You know, we fail sometimes, but one of the things we try is...to do things better. To try and to take what's there and see if we can...make it a little more challenging for us.

In contrast to his own guild, who deliberately stretch themselves in the game, M spoke about watching an Asian guild work together:

Oh my god, I couldn't get over it! I mean, like everybody knew everything. They clearly had done so much research. They read everything there was to know about what they were going after. And as a result, they never fail, but, I think that takes some of the fun out of the game. Some of the fun of the game is going in and not knowing, figuring it out as you go along. Because if you know exactly what's going to go on, the challenge is only either you have enough people or you don't. And they always have enough people, so they do just fine.

For M, dying in-game was a part of the enjoyment:

I mean, because, in a way it's kind of funny when you see everybody wipe...because it's like, okay, let's start all over again – we've got to go back to the beginning and start over again.

Still, he enjoyed very much being a part of a diverse group of people working successfully toward the same goal:

It's also neat when you see everybody paying attention, working as a whole together. It's so neat because we're such an eclectic guild. We've got people from the east coast, west coast, Europe, we have two players from Taiwan. Yeah, it's really quite neat. It's interesting because you get a real kind of a melting pot view, because no two people see it exactly the same way.

I remember one time, before I joined my guild, I was grouping a lot with these friends – different people, I would put them on my friends list, and it was kind of neat because they were from all around the country. No two people were from the same area. I was the only person from New England, and you had people from Texas, California, Idaho, whatnot, and it was kinda neat working with them.

These statements recalled M's assertion that he most enjoys working as part of a group to overcome obstacles within the game ("going after critters"), rather than "go[ing] after people."

Strengths of his character

In terms of his character's class, the rogue, M also stressed the particular ways he could contribute to a group:

And it is an interesting character to play, because it's a character that cannot solo. He can't work on his own, but he can just add so much to a group. So it's just a little kind of interesting character to play because everybody's constantly saying, "hey, can you help me?" "hey, can you help me?" and I'm like, "sure," you know, "let's do it." You know, but I can't really go out on my own and do things because I'll just get eaten. (laughs)

Oh – rogues are unique, because our class is the only class that really can go where no one else can. We have the ability to hide and sneak, and we can go where no one else can go, so there's a lot [rogues can do]. They'll send us out there to figure out what's going on, you know, what kind of critters are out there, who's gonna jump on us when we go in there to do stuff. Ah the other thing that rogues get to do a lot is if things go badly, we're the ones that pull the corpses out so that you can get resurrected and back in the game. So it's kind of a neat combination of scouting and bring everybody back so you can try again. It's really neat in that, one of the first things that my guild had me do when I got into it was they had me go to the North Temple of Veeshan, which is this gigantic zone where everything hates you. I mean, there's not a single thing there that won't

attack you. So I literally had to hide and sneak and run around corners and see what kind of baddies were around and I would send tells back to people saying “okay, there’s five of these here, you’re gonna have to pull these in such a way so that it comes out right.” . . . And it’s spooky because if something happens, nobody can help me at all. I mean, I’m basically gone, I’m dead...try again. (laugh)

M found his character’s limitations made him “interesting...to play” and enjoyed using his character’s particular skills to help his group of players, even when it involved risk to himself. He seemed to enjoy being a helper and felt that his character’s special roles in a group were valued. In turn, he expected that others would take their roles in a group seriously in the game:

I’m never trying to say, am I better than this class or better than that class, because one of the things that was so important about picking your character in the beginning was, you need to understand, what is your role?

Because our raids are generally anywhere from 50 to 70 people, and you get that many people together, if there’s too much chatter, nothing gets done. So, what you’re constantly doing is, you’re keeping quiet, you’re listening to what needs to go on and then you try to do your job as well as possible.

M often made reference to the importance of ‘doing one’s job’ in the game. He explained that he usually does not do anything else while playing, such as watching television or listening to music. He even tries to keep off-topic conversations within the game to a minimum, to better focus on the task at hand;

I mean, I’m a bit of a jokester, I love to tell jokes and stuff like that, but when I’m ‘on the clock’ as it were, I try and be very professional.

[Professionalism means] doing the job right. You know, not constantly making wise remarks. Because one of the things that will happen is, if someone’s trying to explain a very difficult encounter to you, and they’re typing away as fast as they can to get it off, it doesn’t really help if there are 20 or 30 people sounding off, putting in little wise cracks and cute little remarks. I mean, sure it’s funny, but it also detracts from your goal of trying to get what you really want. And, um, while it is a game, very much so, it’s also a challenge. It’s a very hard challenge, and if you don’t take it seriously (laughs), you’ll have a poor experience, because it’s – sure it’s fun to attempt and to do, but I mean, winning is best.

M spoke a lot about the ways his experiences with Everquest had influenced his work life, but very early in the interview spoke about a difference between his roles at work and in Everquest;

To be honest, I've always been very much a team player. But, um, I've always been more of a leader than a follower. But, in my role, I'm not so much a leader. I'm just a guy helping out, doing what I can, just kind of a follower. And I will put my two cents in to help people out, but for the most part I listen to what has to be done then I go and do it – which is nice, the ability to just be able to follow along, take instructions, and do my job. But in real life, I've always tried to be a bit of a problem-solver – it's one of those things I've always enjoyed.

M understood his 'job' in Everquest to be a more passive one than his role in his job, where he is a "problem-solver." While M outlined a contrast between his work and Everquest roles in the above passage, other moments in the interview made the difference less clear. M talked about enjoying challenging himself and his group by taking on difficult encounters and problem-solving around situations within the game. He said that his "mindset" in the game was one involving problem-solving. M also compared situations in-game and at his job, reporting that playing Everquest had helped him become a better at his work:

In business, I'm a trainer and a salesman, so not only am I trying to teach you how to use a product, at first I'm trying to sell you a product. So, it's definitely a case where I have to have my people skills. I have to talk and be able to convince you that what I've got for you is a good thing. In Everquest, that's not a factor. Nobody gets, you don't get to talk to people. You can type to talk, but there's so much you can do with your voice, you gestures, your mannerisms that really affects people in real life, but in a game, all you can say is, you can type, and people can read it and they either buy what you're saying or they don't. And that's really a big difference, and it's kind of helped me in work, because, being able to just understand that you know, it's not always – you can't always just talk your way into a situation, you have to be able to explain in the fewest amount of words possible how to do something right, how to get something done. It's really been quite helpful, to be honest with you.

EQ kinda taught me that, because if you type this big long sentence in EQ, and if you're in a raid or a situation when the spool is just scrolling by so fast, and you

know people will ignore big long sentences because they don't have time. But if you can say it in five words, you know – must go here. (laughs) Something like that, it gets your point across. And I've noticed that in business.

Everquest taught M about the importance of clarity and brevity in chaotic situations at work, and he took his role in the game as seriously as a job, though he described himself as more of a “follower” and less a “problem-solver” online. His stance toward both ‘jobs’ was complicated by a story he told about people in home-care companies he has worked for as a consultant thanking him:

A lot of times people, a lot of cases when I'm doing support, people are like, “you know you're doing God's work.” And I'm like, no I don't really see that myself. I know we're helping people, sure. But, to me it was always just a job. And that's kind of what I want to bring to them. You know, yes, we're bringing you into this, but you're still doing the same job you were before. We're just trying to make it so it works a little better for you.

M disavowed that he was actually doing “God’s work,” but thought of himself as only tweaking the system. In Everquest, M seemed focused on attaining certain goals, accomplishing tasks, but thought of himself as a follower, whereas in his job, he focused on solving a problem, improving other’s jobs without taking much credit for himself. In both cases, it seems that M preferred to be a sort of silent partner in projects. Nonetheless, M himself perceived a difference in his “problem-solving” behavior at work and his being a “follower” in the game. Perhaps in the game the consequences of failure are not as grave – and M has pointed out that if the group does fail and everyone dies, he is able to help by bringing all the corpses back together again.

Interactions with others in-game and offline

Another interesting contrast between M’s perception of his interactions online and off concerned his openness in talking with friends. M said that he felt he had developed friendships through the game and that he would often talk about things that were going

on in his life with his Everquest friends. Explaining how talking with online friends differed from offline friends, he said,

Um, there's a safety net. There's a little bit of anonymity, because you know that you don't physically know this person. So you can be a little bit more open and honest. You know, it's nice because you're not trying to impress someone, you're not trying to have the politics that are involved with your friendships, it's just, just talk. Being very forthright and honest, and you can say what you mean without having to sugar-coat it. Which is a nice thing.

M felt that this openness allowed players to be more direct with each other within the game than they might be in a non-computer mediated relationship.

What I've noticed is that with my real life friends, is you know, you've known someone for a long time you're invested with them, whereas with a real life friend, if they're doing something that's wrong, or doing something self-destructive, you know, you're going to try and help them, but to a certain point you're going to pull back because you don't want to hurt your friend. Whereas, if somebody tells you something in EQ, I'm just gonna say "hey, look, that's a bad thing, you shouldn't be doing it, you should give it up." One of the people that I used to work with a lot, he told me straight out that he was into cocaine. I was like "what are you doing, you're wrecking your life." You know, he was straightforward about it – he told me how he got started and why he's continuing to use, I mean, he was very dispassionate. He was able to say, straightforward to me, whereas if he was a friend he would probably put in some rationales, like it was because of this, or I could give it up anytime. And that's not so much the way he was. He was like "here's why I'm doing it, here's why I continue to do it" and I was able to come right back and him and say, well, you understand that this is what's going to happen as a result, that you're going to be causing yourself and your relatives a lot of injury because you decide to do this. And you know, I don't judge him. I just tell him look, you're doing the wrong thing, and it's gonna cause you problems. And I think a lot of people, like you say, you mention anonymity, there is a feeling of being able to talk to someone, who you don't see, who you don't know – well, you know and you don't know – gives you a bit of openness. And that's how things function.

M noticed that this friend seemed more bluntly honest about his addiction than a face-to-face friend might have been, and M felt he was more able to try to help him without judgment. M also shared a similar story about the benefit of brutal honesty and how it can be lacking in 'real life' relationships;

Yes I have. Um...when my father, my father was in the hospital about two years ago, very, very ill. He recovered, but during that whole time it was very traumatic. And my real life friends were, you know, being very supportive, doing their best to help me out, and they kept saying “everything is going to be okay, everything is going to be okay,” as a real life friend would. But my friends in-game were like, “yeah, you know, everything should be, get better,” but they also said “hey look, you know, if it happens, you know, he’s had a good life, he’s really done a lot of things with his life, you know.” They were able to say to me, “look, you’ll go on, you’ll continue.” I found comfort in that. I really did. Because it was nice to hear them straight up and say “look, nobody wants him to pass away, but if he does, you’ll continue. You will go on.” And uh, none of my real life friends were like that. They were all like, they were all putting the best face on. They were like, “come on, he’s a fighter, he’ll do just fine,” and, to be honest and clear, it was really close – it was nip tuck for quite some time, and he did recover, but if he hadn’t, I think the fact that I was able to get a, get friends in-game to tell me, you know, “it’s a natural process. It’s what happens.” It gave me a release – a pressure release. And it was a good thing.

M found his Everquest friends were more willing to admit to the possibility that his father might die, and more willing to have a frank discussion about his death and the aftermath than his face-to-face friends were. While M did not mention whether he felt frank conversation with his cocaine-using friend had any different effect on the friend’s life, he clearly felt that the conversations about his father online were helpful. This acceptance of the possibility of death seemed to be refreshing to M, and provided him with a kind of support that he was unable to get from his friends outside the game. M described his face-to-face interactions, both around his father and in a case of destructive behavior by friends as somehow restrained, but the “safety net” Everquest provided allowed M and his friends to speak more freely.

Relatedness in Everquest

Asked about the impact of Everquest on his offline life and relationships, M spoke about times he had chosen Everquest over some activity with offline

friends as well as his experience of introducing a girlfriend to the game. M admitted that Everquest would, at times, interfere with activities with his offline friends:

Oh yeah, there have been certain times when I've had to turn down things because a raid was going on or something. My friends, who constantly come over, they'll see me on the computer and they're like "alright, get off the computer now." (Laughs) Cause they know, if they can't get me off as soon as they get there, there's a pretty good chance I'll stay on.

M said that his friends usually could coerce him into quitting the game to spend time with them, but did recall a time that he turned down an invitation to a concert when he discovered that his guild would be taking on a particularly difficult and unusual encounter that evening.

While M described Everquest sometimes getting in the way of interacting with his offline friends, in a past romantic relationship, Everquest "wasn't an issue of friction so much," but an activity they enjoyed together: *"It was a case where I said, look, here's something I really enjoy, why don't you give it a try."* M felt it was important to try to "be inclusive" about his gaming time, rather than expecting his girlfriend to find something else to do while he played. He explained by way of comparison that he would often go with her to the opera, not because he enjoyed it particularly, but because it was important to her and he enjoyed making her happy:

I just said okay, it's important to you, so it's important to me, let's do it, and she was able to do that with EQ as well. She was able to say, it's important to you, therefore it's important to me and I'll be able to try.

According to M, his efforts to include his girlfriend in his enjoyment of Everquest were very successful: "And I got her addicted to the game, and that was kinda neat, because I got to play the mentor." M talked about how much he enjoyed playing the mentor, explaining that doing so renewed his interest in and enjoyment of the game;

A good analogy would be to think about it like – Halloween. When you’re a kid. It’s a lot of fun. Once you hit, like, 13, 14, it’s nothing. You don’t go out and trick-or-treat, you go to parties. But as an adult, being able to take your kids out, get them into costume, take them out trick-or-treating, the fun comes back. It’s a different kind of fun, but it’s even better.

M enjoyed showing his girlfriend interesting parts of the Everquest world, and ensured that she was treated well by others he knew in-game:

I told the people that I played online with that this was my girlfriend, so that kinda instantly gave her status with them, so, well, because they knew me and respected me. So they said, oh well, it’s his girlfriend, you gotta treat her right. And you know they would constantly help her out when she was doing stuff and I wasn’t online.

M seemed to take pride in taking care of his girlfriend in-game. His online reputation enabled him to pass on a certain clout with his guild-mates to his girlfriend. He also described protecting her from certain people who were likely to be rude, even though he might play with them if he were by himself. M explained that he was more tolerant of this sort of person when he was getting started in the game and had something to gain from them:

I used to [play with them], more because they were really really good players, and they were kinda teaching me the ropes. I’d be like gritting my teeth and wouldn’t respond. But once I got to the point where I was good enough to play, where I knew the right people to go with, not so much.

M reported that he currently considers himself, among his guildmates, one of the most vigilant regarding “crass” behavior such as cursing in chat.

Though the relationship had ended, M also noted to me that his now ex-girlfriend still plays the game and explained that he felt most people would enjoy Everquest if they gave it a try.

The dialogue between player and character

In terms of his own character, M reported that he does not consider himself a role-player in Everquest, however it was clear that he had given a lot of thought to developing his Everquest character. M modeled the race and class of his character on a character from a book by one of his favorite fiction writers. Asked if he put any of his own personality into the creation of his character, M replied:

Oh...not so much(laughing), no I'd say that I actually picked him because he was a lot different than I am in real life, you know. These are characters that are, you know, they're thieves, they're always doing questionable stuff. I'm not like that, no, so it was kind of funny to play a character that's a lot different than me in real life.

M reported that he did not identify with his character because rogues do illegal or immoral things, but found the idea of playing a character that does things he would never do interesting, “funny.” However, we have already heard M describe his character as a misunderstood hero who belies the stereotypes of his race and class, and he described effort he took to use the game mechanics (“working faction”) to reflect his fantasy of his character – a hero in the guise of a villain. M’s initial description of his character seemed to indicate that in Everquest he wanted to enact a role that was very different from his own sense of himself, but this later description of a good character who might be mistaken for evil because of his appearance complicates the question of whether M feels his character to be like or unlike him. In fact, M was rather imposing in his presence, with a large build, shaved head and motorcycle jacket, but during our interview I felt him to be very kind and open. When I made this observation to him, M did draw a parallel between himself and his character:

Yeah, he's a sprightly little dude. He's tiny. He's not what they would call robust by any stretch of the imagination. I've always been aware of my size – I was a

football player in high school and college, I used to bounce at bars before I got my professional job, but you know, it's not who I am. And I think I got kind of used to people seeing me as one way when they first met me, it's like ooh, he's this big guy, burly guy, they see me wearing my biker jacket and whatnot and you think I'm gonna be some really bad person. I'm really not. I'm really laid back most of the...I try not to offend people if I can. So, yeah, to a certain extent I would say my character is a parallel to me in certain ways. Because people see him as one thing but he's not. And that's a lot what I am too. It's one of the things I kind of had to overcome in business, because when I would first go out, people see the bald head, the beard and all and think I'm some Cro-Magnon, but it wasn't until they talked to me and got a little chance to get to know me, they understood, hey, here's this guy who's just trying to do a job. The way he lives his lifestyle isn't something that affects the way he works.

In fact, M could easily identify with his character, and presented several situations in which his appearance, like his character's, seemed to mislead others in their estimation of him. Like his character in the game, M had to work to change others' expectations of him, to be accepted as someone who enjoys working together with people.

M's early description of his character as someone who was very unlike him because he does "questionable" things and his later identification with his character as someone who is often misunderstood by others to be a "bad person" creates an interesting tension. If M chose his character to play with a persona that is unlike his own, how is the character different? Is it that he may do "questionable things," or that he is a "hero"? What does it mean that M described his character as "not like me," and yet says that when he plays Everquest he does not consider himself to be role playing? In his description, it seems that the M conducts himself similarly online and off in terms of trying to do his "job" the best he can, and in trying to be a good and not offensive person. The major difference M mentioned in terms of his on- and off-line interactions was that he was more bluntly honest in Everquest than with offline friends, a characteristic that he appreciated in others online.

Game log

In M's logged gameplay session, he joined a group of guildmates and chatted easily with them while they attempted to complete encounters required for quests various group members were attempting. M described enjoying the problem-solving aspects of the game, and at several points in the log, he and the guildmates discuss ways to help each other with the quests they wish to complete. M clearly seemed to enjoy helping others in-game; after one guildmate complained that finishing a particular quest would be a "PITA" (pain in the ass), M and others offered to help him, and M offered him encouragement: *"heh see G__ we can all give you a hand. So buck up little britches...turn that frown up-side down."* Later in the log, the group decided to try to help M kill a monster for one of his quests, but the quest does not work as planned. The group engaged in some problem-solving together, coming to the conclusion that the encounter was "bugged," that is, something is wrong with the program. They then discussed their schedules for the upcoming days and made a plan to reconvene to try again.

The log is full of examples of M and his guildmates engaging in the problem-solving that M said he liked so much about the game, but fewer examples of him being a "follower" rather than a "leader." M explained that he felt he was more a "leader" or "problem-solver" in his offline life, especially at work, but felt more of a "follower" in Everquest. In the two cases in the log described above, M was clearly acting in more of a problem-solving role than being a quiet follower. However, we might understand what M means by being a "follower" in conjunction with his description of Everquest "professionalism": during an encounter led by another group member, M was more quiet

than when they were forming the group or when he was leading the encounter for his quest. By and large, during this encounter, M only spoke to group members about matters directly related to the task at hand, and was otherwise quiet.

Other notable moments in M's log included conversations about the offline lives of players, both those in his group currently and common acquaintances. One group member began a conversation about an absent player who had been sick recently, and M expressed concern for her. Later, when the group was discussing when to try M's "bugged" encounter again, one group member revealed that he will be traveling to Las Vegas for the next few days, and M shared his positive feelings about the place. While these sorts of conversations are not as intimate as the ones M described in our interview as being facilitated by the "safety net of anonymity," they do illustrate that he and his guildmates enjoyed sharing information about their offline lives with each other.

My experience of the interview

Compared to the interview with N, both of my other interviews were far easier. M seemed enthusiastic about the interview and easily reflective about his experience of the game. Again, compared with N's interview, with M and later with D, I followed my interview guide less closely, as both M and D brought up more of their own ideas and experiences on which I could follow up. M's bringing the book about Everquest to show me seemed indicative of his eagerness to share an exciting part of his life with others. Whereas N closed up to one of my questions about explaining his experience to someone who did not know about the game, M seemed to view his participation as a way to explain Everquest and his experience of it to interested others. For example, toward the end of the interview, when invited to tell me anything else he felt was important to know,

he discussed a common perception that Everquest players are generally children or adolescents and explained that he felt it was important to realize that all types of people play the game.

During the interview itself, M spoke easily about a variety of topics, providing me with more leads than I felt I could follow up on in the space of one interview. He was easy to talk with, and in the more communicative spaces of his game log, I could see him using the same friendly manner with his guildmates. I left the interview feeling energized by the interesting tensions we had seemingly easily discovered between his online and offline experiences.

D interview analysis

D is a man in his 30's who works the night shift at a 24-hour copy shop. Before agreeing to meet to do an interview with me, he asked me several questions about the study via email, mainly concerned with my perspective on the game and what my research goals were. Though I expected he might be somewhat guarded in the interview due to his initial hesitancy, D was very forthcoming and seemed to speak freely. I met with him in the morning after he worked a night shift.

Relatedness in Everquest

D's interview began with a discussion of the game session he had logged for me. He pointed out that there was not much dialogue between players in the log, which recorded a guild raid. I asked whether raids were what D most enjoyed about the game, to which he replied:

Uh, it's pretty much the only thing that keeps me going with this game. Otherwise I would've burnt out a while ago. So it's mainly the people you meet. You know, you wanna log in and...you know.

Early on in the interview, D presented a seeming contradiction. He told me that, in his log, “there’s not much chat going on, there’s just instructions,” and said that guild raids are the only things that still attract him to the game. In the same response, however, the “it” that “keeps me going with this game” seemed to change from raiding to people. At other times in the interview, when D reflected on what drew him to continue playing Everquest, he pointed to the people he knew through the game, not to accomplishments in raids:

everybody I talk to, they're like, "I can't believe I'm still playing this game after 5 years." But it's not the game itself, it's just the people that you meet within the game.

D mentioned specifically feeling close to some friends he spoke to every day in his guild:

Well, when I log in in the morning, like I get out of work at 8, and I'll go home, and just to like wind down from work and stuff I'll log in and play. And that's when my girlfriend's at work, so you know, I don't have to worry about that (laughs). and I usually – see our guild is like, an east coast guild, where everybody works during the day, and they get out of work at 5 or 6, and start raiding at 7 at night. So, in the morning, there's some people from Austrailia and Europe, [who] are in the guild. I don't know how they juggle their time like that. And there's only like a handful, like 6 or 7 or 8, so when I log in it's usually the same people that I play with. And then at night when I log in, there's probably like 70, 60-70 people. So it's kinda hard to like, get to know everybody. And everybody in the guild has certain people they hang [with] – there's like cliques in the guild, you know? So I would say logging in the morning, being able to see the same people and, you know, like “how was work?” They know I work at night and this and that. I mean we chat, not just about the game, but like, “what do you do?” “Oh I do this.” Or, you know, so you definitely form a relationship there, even though you don't meet them face-to-face or talk to them on the phone or anything. You know, if I didn't log in – I'll go home and I'll log in and they'll be like “oh, where were you? We were waiting for you.” Because they know I log in every day at like 8:30. So it's just, you know, it's nice to have that, I think.

These friends were part of D's everyday routine, and he seemed to note in this passage that they would likely wonder where he was, as meeting with me for an interview had prevented him from playing with them as he usually would.

Again and again in the interview, D referred to the reality of his friendships with others online, maintaining (though ambivalently at times) they were as real as those relationships he maintains offline.

Like, um, like that kid who up and quit because of divorce. And he posted that, like everybody in the guild was like, "oh, go do what you've gotta do." You know, "real life comes first," this and that. But it's funny how people, like, differentiate this between like real life and...fantasy land or whatever they wanna call it. But it's funny how like someone is always gonna quit the guild and the game, they'll be like "Oh, real life comes first." Like, you know, this isn't real life or something. It's like, it's funny how people, like separate the two. You know, I never actually, like, really thought about it, but. They don't consider this, I guess, real life or something. In which case it isn't, but you know, they're really sitting there behind the computer screen. It's real life with me when I go home and do that (laughs). But, it's funny just to see, like, grown people say that. Like, oh real life comes first, play time is you know, I don't know, it's weird, but I guess that's what keeps me going back, is seeing the same people. And just having that relationship with them. I guess it's just like a modern-day pen pal type of thing. Like some people would look forward to getting a letter every week, or whatever.

And that distinction seems funny because you wouldn't say, this letter isn't real life.

Yeah. Exactly, you know what I mean? Like, tv isn't real life, or like a hobby isn't. I just consider it a hobby.

This passage, in which D asserted that Everquest is as real as any other hobby people engage in, is full of interesting points for exploration. D found it remarkable that players who are on the verge of divorce due to spending too much time on Everquest would not consider Everquest real life. D seemed to struggle with the differentiation between 'just a game' and 'real life' when it comes to Everquest, noting that "It's real life with me when I go home and do that," and that other players are "really sitting there behind the computer screen." In fact, he thought it "funny" that "grown people" would say such

things, implying perhaps that he felt “grown people” should know better than to mistake Everquest for something less than real life. D’s own conceptualization of what is “real life” became unclear, however, when he elaborated on his analogy between Everquest and other “real” pastimes, such as writing letters to a pen pal. D reported that the distinction between real life and not real life in Everquest was similar to saying that “tv isn’t real life, or like a hobby isn’t.” While one might maintain that television is “real life,” one might also argue that television is “real” in a very different way from a hobby or a pen pal.

D later struggled again with differentiating the “reality” and significance of relationships online and off when he discussed his efforts to balance Everquest with his relationship with his girlfriend:

There was a point in time where I thought if I wasn’t at a raid or something that it would affect the raid or I wouldn’t help, you know, I’d be letting people down if I wasn’t there. I came to realize that’s not the case. If I don’t log in, the Everquest world ain’t gonna stop (laughs), come to a standstill. So, I come to a point where I can just not log in, and just hang out with her. So I realized that. Even though there’s still real people behind the game, but I don’t really know them. My girlfriend, like she’s, she’s something that’s there, like a real person. So she should demand more of my attention than the actual game or people I don’t even really know, but I’ve known longer, you know, through the game, but I don’t really know them. Like, face to face.

D seemed to struggle to articulate what differentiated the kind of knowing someone that happens online from the kind that happens off. I pressed him to explain more what he meant:

Um, that’s a good question. I guess before this game I would say to really know someone is to meet them, hang out with them, maybe see if you click or whatever. But I guess with the internet world, with my brother meeting his girlfriend of like 3 years now in the game, I guess it’s a moot point if you can’t see them or if you can see them. But I guess you could say I really don’t know – like a lot of the people I don’t know what they do, on their off time, or what they were like when they were younger, in the past, or their dreams or aspirations. I uh, with her I do.

You know that. And I mean in the game it's like, superficial, like, when you're with someone and you click, you get that good feeling – in reality. Kinda like, a natural high, almost. But in the game, it's like a superficial high. It's not like the high you get when you see someone that you really like, your heart starts pounding and you get all sweaty. It can get like that on raids, when like, everything comes together. But it's like a short-lived superficial thing. And I guess like that physiological part of the game, when you get like that, it – I guess that adrenaline rush of it is very addicting. Like a lot of people are adrenaline junkies, like they'll go bungee jumping and all that. You know, like jump out of airplanes, parachute, sky diving. Cause they're addicted to that rush. Well it's the same thing within the game, like, you got 50 people working together to kill one thing. It's like, woah! (laughs) just how it all comes together

[unintelligible line from interviewer]

Yeah, yeah. And uh, that's a good rush. But in real life, it's a different one. More real. I think. You can share it with someone real. But even though people in the game, on the other side of the computer are real, you don't get to see their faces and their expressions. I mean, you can imagine it, they're typing. Which, years ago you probably never could do it. Before the influx [sic] of online gaming and stuff like that. But the evolution of it is really amazing, you know? That this game could still be going, after all this time. 10 years, 15 years it still could be.

Each time D began to draw a distinction between online and offline relationships, he complicated his own distinction, and eventually changed the subject to talk about players being addicted to adrenaline or to the evolution of the game and its longevity. D made reference to his brother to explain that not being able to see a person does not preclude knowing them well; D's brother met his girlfriend through Everquest, and she moved from another state to live with him. He explained that though he cannot see the expressions of others, he can imagine what they might look like by reading their chat. He also described his own emotions being stirred up – getting an “adrenaline rush” – both through interactions with his girlfriend and through working together with others on a raid.

Impact of Everquest on D's offline life

D seemed to work to differentiate between the “reality” of online versus offline relationships as part of an effort to justify paying more attention to his girlfriend, who

“should demand more of my attention than the actual game or people I don’t even really know.” It was clear from his interview, however, that D’s girlfriend struggles to compete for D’s attention with the game. D discussed a typical weekend scenario:

Well, like, my guild raid generally raids on the weekends. All day Saturday, like 8 hours or 9 hours, and then Sunday the same thing. And, uh, for the most part she’s just like sitting around watching tv, which I guess she gets bored with. And then she’ll start bugging me looking for attention, or trying to get my attention. Um, and I’ve gotten in fights about it with her. So it can be a destructive thing in a relationship, definitely.

In fact, D said they get into fights about Everquest “pretty much every weekend.” He described how distant the two can be while he is playing Everquest, even if they are both in the same room:

Otherwise it’s like, I’m doing my thing and she’s off doing her thing and she feels like, I guess because of the game it’s like, you know, I’m in the room, and I’m there with her, but I’m not really there, you know? There’s been times when she has like, asked me something and I just did not hear it. Or she’ll be like as far away from – we are, and she’ll be like, “hey, could you go get the mail?” or whatever, and I’ll just...

It doesn’t register

Yeah (laugh). I’m so into the game. Or she’s like “log off now, or I’m leaving.” And, you know, how it is, you can’t just like hit the power button and you’re off, you’ve gotta like tell everybody “alright I’m leaving,” find a replacement for the group you’re in or whatever, get to a safe spot, so it takes a good like, 5-10 minutes to get out of the game. And she doesn’t understand that, so, that’s, you know, she’s learning but...

D was difficult to distract when playing the game, to the point that his girlfriend resorted to making threats to leave in order to get his attention. Even at this point, though, D observed the social protocol of the game by giving others notice that he would be leaving and making sure the others were prepared to continue playing with a replacement. Finally, he moved his character to “a safe spot” to avoid a death for his character before attending to his offline relationship, which was ostensibly in crisis. In fact, should D

choose to, he could “hit the power button” and be done with the game more quickly, but doing so might risk his online relationships and his character’s status.

D went on to describe a typical weekend fight over Everquest and its resolution:

Hm... it usually starts with like, dinner. You know, like getting something to eat. And she'll be like, "I'm hungry." And she doesn't cook at all, and I used to be a chef, so I cook a lot, or I'll order, you know. And she'll be like "I'm hungry." And I'll be like, "alright, give me a couple of minutes." An hour will go by (laughs). And then she'll be like, you know, "let's eat." Like, more words than that, but it boils down to that, and uh, and then I'll be like "alright alright, a couple more minutes." And then she really starts to get mad, like "can't you turn away from that game for three seconds?" and then she'll come over, and I'll be like, in the middle of a raid with my guild. And uh, we're kind of like a higher end guild, we're doing the new expansion that's out right now, and so every little bit kind of counts, cause they're really tough hard MOBs. And I don't know if you know the way the game is designed, but if you're not there for the kill, then you don't get flagged to move on to the next area, so it's kinda like, you wanna be there, otherwise you'll miss out and you won't be at the next raid because you don't have the flag. So, she'll like, come swivel my chair around (demonstrates swiveling motion) and, that's what I mean by she tries to like, grab my attention. And it just gets to the point where like, it gets very annoying and I'll be like, I might just say like "Look! Give me a minute, let me finish this." And then she gets upset and goes into her room. And I'll finally get off and be like "Okay, what do you want to eat?" and she won't talk to me or whatever, but then I'll just start cooking and she'll come out.

D repeatedly put off his girlfriend’s requests for dinner in order to finish a particular task with his guild, which would take an uncertain amount of time. It was unclear from D’s story whether he sincerely expected the raid to take “a couple of minutes” when he told his girlfriend to wait, but D clearly felt compelled to stay until the end, lest he miss out on future raids with his guild. Thus, the risk of losing time with friends online, at least temporarily, outweighed the risk of angering his girlfriend offline. D described feeling annoyed with his girlfriend for repeatedly asking him about dinner plans, seeing it as a mark of her dependence on him, but admitted that she could use the question of dinner to

help lure him out of the game. When I asked what he is thinking and feeling when his girlfriend asked about dinner, he replied:

Well I acknowledge it, and I tell her – uh, she’s very dependent, which really bugs me. I say “Fine, pick up the phone and order something, you know, and I’ll get it when it comes.” Or I’ll say “What do you want to eat?” She won’t say anything. She’ll just be like, “I’m hungry” and I’ll be like “Well, what do you want?” Or like, “Well, order something, get it delivered” or whatever, I’ll go get it. And she’ll be like, but she can’t make a choice of what she wants to order. Like, it’s gotta be...and I guess, maybe that’s her way of like, you know, making me to like, think outside of the game, about food or whatever. To make me make the choice so I turn away from the game or something.

Everquest as soft addiction

While D sometimes felt frustrated with his girlfriend’s attempts to limit his time on Everquest, he admitted that the game is a major part of his daily life. Our interview took place shortly after a new Everquest expansion program was released, which raised the highest attainable level of character from 65 to 70. When D told me his character had reached this level already, I voiced surprise, as such advancement would require dozens of hours of play time. D explained, “Well, that’s what I do – I go to work at night and I go home...it’s pretty much what I do.” In fact, D reported that he currently played approximately 24-30 hours per week, but during the time when he was playing the most, he played approximately 50 hours per week. He said:

Unless you’re like a single guy or girl, and you have loads of time on your hands, it can get out of control, very fast. I’m guilty of calling in sick to work so I can stay home and play. This game has a – it almost takes – for some people it takes control over their lives. Just because it’s such a fun game.

Over the course of the interview, D made several remarks justifying the amount of time he devotes to the game. The justifications seemed to fall into two interrelated categories: the game as equivalent to any other valid form of entertainment, and the game as a relatively harmless addiction:

And for me, it's like, I justify it by, you know, it's a cheap form of entertainment. You know, I could go out, to a bar or whatever, like I used to and spend a lot of money, but you know, it's pretty cheap. It's a very interesting game, you know, I like it a lot.

I look at it as a hobby. You know, a lot of people build models or whatever. But, I guess it can be counterproductive, just sitting in front of a computer screen all day, but...it's...I can think of a million things worse I could be doing (laughs). But I could probably think of a million things better I could be doing (laughs).

Like a lot of my friends they don't understand how I could spend so much time playing a game. And, well A. who are you to tell me what I can do with my time and B. what do you do every weekend? Well, we go out to a bar and drink. And how much money do you spend? Oh, 60-70 dollars. And I'm just like, yeah? Well I spend 12 dollars a month. And, have a lot more fun playing that than I would at the bar anyway.

D's expression of the value or validity of devoting his time to Everquest was conflicted in most cases; while he said with certainty that spending time on Everquest was better for him than drinking, he believed there are even better ways one could spend time.

Nonetheless, D reported that Everquest had played a very important role in helping him to stop his substance abuse:

Before I actually got into this game, I was really into drugs, and addicted to a lot of bad drugs, and I went to jail a couple of times. And then, right around when I found this game I started really trying to clean up and sober up. I felt at the time, and I still do, that this game has kinda helped me. Cause it just gave me another addiction to like, fill the void, you know. And that's what they teach ya, trying to get clean, is to uh, just find another addiction to replace it with, for the time being.

Everquest was a new addiction for D, to replace drugs and alcohol. By his own description, Everquest did not so much give him a forum for talking about his addictions, but simply provided an alternate activity, a sort of distraction. D said that he did not often talk to people in the game about his substance use, but spoke of one exception:

I met some kid in the game who just happened to, I was grouping with, and he just happened to say like, I'm going to rehab today or this week, so I'm not gonna be – he was in my – I was in another guild before and he was in my guild at the time.

And he was like, “You’re probably not going to be seeing me for a couple of weeks cause I’m going into rehab.” And I was like oh, what are you going for, blah blah blah. You know, it was a similar situation. I just told him about what happened to me and how EQ has, I don’t think of it as like saved me or anything, but just helped me. It calms me down kind of, you know, cause I can get really...I don’t know what’s the word, but it just calms me down. Like, mellows me out. I can get figety and then my minds starts wandering – like I’ve always got to be constantly doing something. Like, I can’t just sit there and watch tv. It gets to the point where it’s just not enough to keep me occupied, but this game is. That’s what I like about it.

At the time, D said he “had been like a year or two or three maybe, like playing the game and clean. And he was just starting to, like, try and get clean.” He detailed to me, and possibly to the player who was entering rehab, the ways that Everquest had helped him out of, if not saved him from, his addiction. In particular, it seemed that Everquest helped to relieve the anxiety associated with stopping using. However, he noted that his attempts to give up Everquest have been comparable to attempting to stop an addiction to drugs or alcohol:

There were times when I was just like, summertime is here, and I don’t wanna just like waste another summer. Not so much waste, but you know, I wanna do something else. And, so I would for a week or two, and then I’d find myself going back to it more and more – slowly. And then uh, then like I was thinking about it one day – I wonder why I can’t just quit this game, just like up and quit? I suppose I could if I really wanted to, but every time that I really tried, I’d do it for a little while and then kind of go back to it. So then I was like, well, maybe it’s because uh, you know, I still have that, the temptation because the character is still there. You know, it’s not not there, it’s not deleted or anything.²⁹ And I guess it almost goes back to when I was doing drugs – if you quit, you’ve gotta remove all, you know, paraphernalia or whatever from your house or apartment. Because it could be a trigger, like if you see something like that, then, you know, it gets you in that mindframe.

D’s story of trying to quit Everquest and managing the “triggers” reads very much like an account of someone trying to quit drinking; he wants to change, and succeeds for a little while, but always ends up using again, without being able to articulate how he came to

²⁹ Please see Appendix 1 for an explanation of the sense in which characters exist separately from the players.

start using again. He imagined he could quit if he really wanted to, but also noticed that as long as his character is not completely deleted, he will have the urge to go back. He continued to elaborate the addictive nature of his experience of the game and of himself:

I mean, I almost equate it, like, an addiction is an addiction, and I have an addictive personality, so I kind of see this as an addiction. And I also play guitar, and I see that as an addiction because sometimes I do that too much. So, but I'm aware of it, though, I'm not like a...like, I'm not like not aware of it, I'm not oblivious to the fact that I have an addictive personality. And my girlfriend knows that, so she knows that, like I said before I could be doing a lot of worse things with my time.

Again, D touched on the impact of the game on his relationship with his girlfriend, but justified his focus on the game as a harm-minimization strategy. He also used the language of addictions to refer to another hobby of his, playing guitar, and to his understanding of himself as having an “addictive personality.” Finally, D pointed out as a sort of mitigating factor that he was aware of being “addicted” to these activities.

D also talked about how ‘addicting’ the game can be for others, as he did when he said, “Unless you’re like a single guy or girl, and you have loads of time on your hands, it can get out of control, very fast.” He talked about the way the game seems to draw people to spend a lot of time playing:

And I mean, just the potential of like, you know what was happening within the game and the outcome, and how people or why people can sit there for 12, 14, 15 hours at one time and just keep going. Like, I'll log in this morning when I go home, and uh, for a couple hours, whatever, and I'll go to bed, cause I gotta work tonight. And, I'll get up and log back in, after like, whatever, 8-9 hours of sleep, and the same people will be logged in at the same spot doing the same thing (laughs). so there's definitely a pull. It's definitely [got] some type of addiction to it.

Here D let me know the major role Everquest had in his daily life, but also pointed out that others spend even more time with the game.

The cost of playing and the cost of quitting

Just as the game has been a continual source of strife between D and his girlfriend, D talked about others he knew who experienced similar relationship problems over the game:

It's definitely a little rift of contention [sic] there between us. And also people in my guild that I have met, uh, they say the same thing. Unless their spouse plays, or accepts it, or whatever, or has something for them to do at the time, like go out with a friend or something, then there's always that little rift. Like one guy in my guild has just recently got divorced because of it. He's like, "We're on the verge of divorce, and I have a chance to save it if I quit this game, so." And like, he's got a family, you know, he's got kids and stuff, but there's some guys that just say "The hell with it," you know, just keep playing. Because it's just, you know, they, I guess, it's part of them. Plus you've invested so much time into it. There's a big hook there, and they know it, you know, the gaming companies, they know it, so they just keep you there. It's kind of like gambling. I guess once you start and get into it, it just pulls you out of reality. And maybe for a lot of people, reality isn't, you know, a good place, or a place they really thought they would be. You know? So this kinda helps them I guess.

D reported here that most people in his guild have difficulty balancing Everquest with offline romantic relationships. He pointed out that some players have such a hard time finding balance that their spouses threaten divorce, but then imagined several reasons why someone might not stop playing the game, even when faced with the prospect of divorce. On one hand, he pointed to the addictive quality of the game again and suspects that the makers of Everquest exploit this quality to keep people playing, but he also guessed (we might safely say projects) that the game is an important part of the player's identity – “part of them” – and that the game provides an alternative to “reality” that is preferable to the player's everyday experience. He mentioned a particular online friend and his troubles with his girlfriend over the game:

But he's, I guess he's not as heavily into the game, and he'll be like, he'll miss a raid to go out with his girlfriend or whatever. But other times he'll be like "My

girl's yelling at me, I don't know what to do – she wants me to get off this stupid game.”

Unlike D, this player missed guild raids to spend time with his girlfriend, but nonetheless got into fights with her about time spent on the game. D's change of subject in this passage left the story of his friend and his girlfriend without resolution. D's own fights with his girlfriend also seemed to lack a clear resolution, ending only when D begins cooking and his girlfriend comes out of her room and begins to talk to him again. D did have an idea about involving his girlfriend in the game in a more positive way, however, despite her present aversion to it:

she likes, you know, like Nintendo and stuff like that where we can play together, but uh, like my computer now is dying, so I plan on getting another one, very soon, so I'll have two. You know, I could probably set them up next to each other, that way we could play together.

D hoped that he could make Everquest a positive experience for his girlfriend by playing together with her, thus perhaps easing the tension between online and offline relationships.

The meeting of Everquest and 'real life'

Quotations excerpted above have illustrated that when D struggled to find a balance between online and offline relationships, he seemed to get stuck on the issue of which relationships are 'real life' and thus warrant more attention than less 'real' relationships. In his discussion about how interacting with others in Everquest can differ from face-to-face interactions, D often pointed to connections between the character in Everquest and the player's own life. D particularly focused on the ways in which people in Everquest can be more rude than they might be offline:

'Cause people are saying a lot of things that they wouldn't really say to people in real life, and even in the guild, like, people get really mad at someone for doing

something within the game, that affects their character in the game, which in turn affects them and their time, but then, after a while, they'll be like, "Oh I sometimes get too carried away. I don't realize, you know, that there's real people behind the characters."

D explained that the people who usually say mean things without consideration for the other player are usually people who are "always there" whenever he logs on, and that this type of player is especially easy to irritate. D described how he and a friend deal with such situations:

And uh, then you just gotta tell them, "You don't know me, really. You don't really know me. Would you say this to my face if you met me? I'm not some 13 year old kid." You know? And me and a friend were just talking about that the other day, because I guess he stepped on someone's toes, similar to that, and the kid just went off on him, like big time. And he was telling me that he was like telling this kid to, you know, just chill out, step back. "You don't know me. I'm a construction worker, 30 year old guy, and you're just a little college kid that has too much time on your hands and is always playing (laughs) the game, so just relax, chill out, log out, take a walk or something."

Both of these players appealed to their status in the offline world to disarm aggression in-game, and both specifically pointed to their adulthood as entitling them to respect, implying that adolescents may be treated more roughly.

D guessed that people who are rude to others in-game "get carried away, because they do have that safety net of being in their comforts of their own home, they can go off, and not have any consequences...like lasting consequences." Immediately, though, D pointed out that there were some consequences for one's actions in-game:

but once you step over that line, you're always known as someone that...that's just – to stay away from. You know, childish. And there's a lot of people like that in the game. You just know – they form a reputation for themselves. That you just know not to group with them, or just, they gotta have control. And maybe they don't have control in their own lives, so in the game, they like, you know, they wanna enforce and control, or [have] supposed control over you. You know, whatever, I don't care.

D seemed to be speaking for himself and others when he said he avoids players who are controlling and added his own interpretation of why someone might behave in that way. D imagined that controlling people are using the game to get something that they do not have in their offline lives - control. This interpretation seemed to connect with his previous guess that some players might not stop playing, even when threatened by divorce, because the game distracts them from an unpleasant reality, much like drugs or alcohol might.

D explained that people who consistently treat others poorly in-game will sometimes start new characters in the hope of escaping their bad reputations. D explained that he believed one can recognize the player even when the character changes:

But their personality, you can always tell, it's the same person. Which is interesting in a game, like, even though you don't really know the person or see them or recognize them, you can always tell by their personality who they are – or how certain things will make them flip out and they'll just go off. I mean, you can tell, you know.

D shared his experiences of recognizing players even when their characters had changed:

Um, let me think...well, it's usually in the form of bad playing. Like if someone is not good at their class, then other people will try and offer them help or tell them, "you're just not good." You know, "try another class." And then, the person that you tell that to doesn't like it, and they flip out and say "who are you to tell me how to play my class", and they get offended. Which, you know, is right, but most people are like "hey, thanks, for letting me" you know, "helping me out" without taking offense to it. 'Cause it's not like reprimanding. You're just offering them pointers, so they can be better, cause if they don't it's just a waste of your time to play with them. Because they get your character killed. It's just a waste of time to play with them (laughs). So you try to help them out so it's not wasting your time. And then uh, sooner or later they're just known as just a bad shaman, or whatever. There's one character that was like that, and uh, I guess he just ran with that reputation after a while, and like would just be a total dick to everybody. And uh, would like loot anything and everything and steal everything, up and sell his character, get whatever, like \$100 on Ebay for it, and then start a new character. And then you wouldn't know for a while who it was, until they reached the same level you are at, and then once they did, you could tell that this person doesn't know how to play their class. And if you try to offer them help,

they get really offended, and they just do the same behavior. It's like people follow the same patterns and behavior and you can recognize them. Some people can, some people can't. some people are better at recognizing it than others. Uh, like this one person swore up and down that this guy who ebayed was this new character on the server. Everybody was like "no, no, no, this guy's so chill, and he's really nice, and he knows how to play his class." And it turns out that it was him. They just recognized it really fast that it was him. Unless he knew him in real life, I don't know, but, there's some people that really – they're good at spotting that.

It seemed that D's primary way of recognizing players has to do with how much they know about the game and how they accept criticism for things they do not know.

Conversely, having a good reputation for D seemed to involve knowing how to play one's class well and accepting criticism without defensiveness. D said he rarely behaves aggressively toward others in-game and discussed ways that he tries to be mindful of his own reputation:

I knew from the very beginning that like, mainly all you have in this game is your reputation. And if you ruin that within the game, you might quit or change servers or whatever. So I was always really helpful and careful like if someone new comes into the game and they're asking questions, like if they can have, whatever, money, platinum, extra loot or whatever, I always try and help them out. And then they remember me, remember you as a helpful person.

He reported that the only time he "went off" in the game was after repeatedly having guild leaders "yell at everybody" when the guild failed to achieve in-game goals. D said he finally "called them on it" and got support from other guild members for doing so. D did not feel, however, that speaking up in this situation was very different from what he would have done in a face-to-face confrontation. He compared that episode to one the previous night during which he got angry with a customer who was treating the copy machines roughly:

And I told her "look, you keep doing it I'm going to have to ask you to leave." She kept doing it and I was like "Can you leave?" and she was like "No, I will not." So I let the other girl deal with her (laughs), cause I couldn't deal with her.

But yeah, that's generally how I am in life. If something's not right, then, you know, I'll speak up about it. Usually. In-game I have a little more, uh, I don't know, what's the word for it, a little more guts to do it because there's less consequences involved.

While D began this story as an example of the way he speaks up for himself both in and out of game, in the end he turned this problem over to a co-worker, and commented that he felt braver standing up for himself online. Online, while there were negative consequences for speaking out against the guild leaders (getting kicked out of the guild), D got praise and support from his peers for acting the way he did. In this offline situation, D found himself ineffective and had to look to others for help.

Other experiences of the game and his character

Perhaps it is not surprising, as many of D's comments connected Everquest characters to the players behind them, that D did not often differentiate himself from his Everquest character in our interview. D explained his feelings about his character and his inspiration for creating him:

Um, well, he's a rogue. And I made him about 4 and a half years ago, so...kind of attached to him.

I always felt kinda like, I guess more of a diabolical person inside, so I picked the rogue. And uh, and then that movie, uh, you know the one that was in Rome, and he was like a...Gladiator... Yeah, and I was actually, my name was going to be Maximus, after him, just, you know, picking a name, but someone already had it.

Um, well, when I'm playing the game, it kinda takes me out of reality – whatever else. I guess I kinda project a little of myself onto him, and vice versa. Uh, not so much diabolical in an evil or bad way, but just sort of like sneaky. Um, like in the shadows type of person, like more intent on just sitting back. Like I'm not an outspoken person within the game, I just am kinda quiet, so that's I guess how I am in real life – like that.

What about the vice versa part, projecting your character back onto you?

Um, well, for a while it was...I got really heavily into the game. That's really all I would do, was work and play the game, so while I was at work I would think about what I'd be doing tomorrow in the game, or looking up on the Safehouse

[Everquest-related website] quests and stuff like that. So I kinda got a little too much into it.

D softened his description of his character as he relates the character's qualities to himself – “diabolical” became “sneaky,” “in the shadows,” and finally a more passive “sitting back.” He reported that at times his thoughts about his character and Everquest spread into the other areas of his life, and mentioned that the game “takes [him] out of reality.” This segment again connects with his guess that some people continue to play Everquest because reality isn't a “good place,” while also marking that Everquest can create a disconnect from reality even while one is not actively playing the game - by reading Everquest-related websites at work, for example. A previous quotation from D illustrated just how much a part of his day Everquest is, even at a time when he did not consider himself “really heavily into it”:

Like, I'll log in this morning when I go home, and uh, for a couple hours, whatever, and I'll go to bed, cause I gotta work tonight. And, I'll get up and log back in, after like, whatever, 8-9 hours of sleep.

D mentioned in our interview that he sometimes thought about quitting Everquest, but that it was harder than it seemed. He shared what he imagined the process would involve:

Well, I guess, a lot of people once they reach a certain point, like if they quit and they don't delete – it's kind of like quitting smoking, if you quit cold turkey. You rip the band-aid right off, in one rip (laughs) you know? Like don't do it too slowly. So it's the same principle I guess, like... if you're really serious about quitting, a lot of people say delete your character, uninstall all the files, break your CDs so you can't install them again, this and that.

D used the language of addictions again when discussing quitting the game “cold turkey” and noted the importance of removing everything associated with Everquest from his home and deleting his character. D reflected on his past attempts at quitting and blamed

his ‘relapses’ on his failure to destroy his Everquest discs and character. D explained that the urge to play Everquest can be very difficult to resist if something “triggers” his urge to play. His urge to play the game seemed to have all the power of an urge to use drugs or alcohol. While he had ideas about the way to quit Everquest for good, D said he had never gone as far as deleting his character:

Like I entertained the thought of like selling my character on ebay, but then I was like, no that would be kind of like a slap in the face of all the time that I put into it. And the people that helped me get all the stuff for him.

D valued his character and the time he had devoted to him, and it seems that deleting the character would, for D, render that time and energy meaningless. D also noted that deleting his character might cause a disruption in his relationships with others through Everquest. Of course, his access to his online friends would change, if not stop altogether, when he stopped playing the game, but his concern seems to extend to his friends’ feelings about him after he has stopped playing. Their relationship might be preserved in some way as long as his character is not deleted, but has the potential to be played again.

D also discussed how the game affects his emotional life, noting that the game is capable of having such an impact on one’s life that “Some people have actually killed themselves over the game.” Asked about whether the game had ever had a negative impact on his emotions, he reported feeling very frustrated when he tries to lead a raid and people do not cooperate:

And that kinda gets me upset, because it’s like, you know, if they just took the time, and didn’t rush in, thinking they could do it, and it’s just a waste of time. And that’s what gets me upset. You know, I took the time to get everyone here, did all the research on it. They didn’t. They’re trying to think they can do a better [job] when they don’t know the encounter. And then when they get us

killed you just like, I've come to points where I just want to take my mouse and like, smash it, like "uuugh!" My keyboard, like, "uugh!"

D pantomimed breaking his mouse and keyboard in frustration at others who do not cooperate with him, making all his effort "just a waste of time." In contrast, D described the euphoric feelings associated with successfully completing some objective in-game:

I mean, when it all comes together. And everybody's like "Yeah! Yeah!" typing "yeah!" or "woot!" or something. So everybody really really, they're all like "congratulations!" and this and that. And it's just, you know, feel good that you can lead that many people. I think in the beginning, this game wouldn't be as popular as it was if Everquest didn't force people to group – together in groups and work together. 'Cause we can take 50 people, and they won't be able to beat a certain encounter, and they won't know what they're doing. And they just go at it. It actually takes thinking and calculation, and doing the right things at the right time. Or, one small mistake could ruin everything. Once everything comes together it's a really really good feeling.

D guessed that working together in groups is one of the primary draws of Everquest for most people, and talked about the pride associated with accomplishing a major task through cooperation. He reported that the joys of major successes in the game sometimes extended outside the game:

Oh yeah. You feel real proud of the guild, then you take a screenshot and post it on the website. I mean, out of all the servers, there's probably like, what, 35 servers? Everybody kinda like, tracks who's the top guild of all the servers and what they're doing. And there's kinda like a little prestige that goes with it, in the online world. A couple people that play, like the leaders of really popular, high-end guilds, that do things first, have really gotten like, prestige. They've gotten jobs out of it – Sony has asked them to work for them. Or to like, beta-test some of the new stuff. So yeah there's definitely a good pride feeling, a prestige that goes with it.

D explained that he had never expected to get a job from Everquest himself, but does mention it as a possibility. Getting a job with Sony seemed to be part of a spectrum of outside-the-game recognition that one might acquire from accomplishments inside the

game which included recognition through websites where one might post pictures of one's in-game exploits.

Game log

When I asked D to describe the interactions in his log during our interview, he said it was a guild raid in which “there’s not much chat going on, there’s just instructions.” On the disk he brought me, however, there were two log files: the guild raid log, which was dated the same month as our interview, and another, short log, dated about six months earlier. The log of the raid has very little chat between players, and only a few lines of chat between D and another player about a topic outside the game. That D chose this part of the game to share with me might demonstrate how important in-game accomplishments are to him. In our interview, however, D spoke at length about his in-game friends and the role they have in drawing him to log on each day, and the raid log does very little to illustrate his style of personally relating to others through the game.

The other log included on the disk D gave me provided more opportunity to witness D interacting with others outside of a raiding context. The log begins with D attempting to help resolve a conflict or misunderstanding between two other players. Though D appears to know little about this conflict, when another player approached him for help, he spent time talking with him or her, and spoke to other guild members to try to gain more information about the conflict. While this interaction took place, D simultaneously made plans to meet with other guild members to form a group, and received and rejected offers from strangers to form groups. Carrying on so many conversations at once might seem difficult, but D was polite and friendly with everyone who contacted him, even when rejecting offers from strangers. This section of the log

clearly illustrated D's assertion in our interview that he was very mindful of his reputation in-game and strove to be helpful to everyone he encountered.

Later in the same log, D met other guild members to form a group and chatted casually with them. He seemed to discuss guild politics with one group member, then caught up with another group member who he had not seen in-game in some time. They discussed their offline activities (such as attending a Prince concert) before changing the focus to the group's in-game plans. In this brief interaction, one could see the value D and his guildmates place on their relationships, as well as the extent to which they shared information about their offline lives.

My experience of the interview

Like M, I found D easy to talk with, and was interested by the ideas and experiences he brought to the interview as areas for exploration. With D, however, his being reflective on his own experience of the game seemed a mixed blessing. D talked quite a bit about the "addictive" aspects of the game and the role it played in overcoming his own substance abuse, but looking back at the interview, I realized that the "addiction" construct had remained largely unexplored in our conversation. While D seemed very open and willing to explore his experience in the interview, I wished afterward that I had assumed less shared knowledge and explored his conception of addictions and how one manages them. Nonetheless, D was very open in discussing very personal aspects of his experience of the game, and I found our interview very fruitful for exploration.

Across-interview analysis

Belonging to a community – online and off

Looking across all three interviews for common themes, the one that stood out most concerned the sense of community participants enjoyed through Everquest. All the participants discussed the ways in which they feel a part of a group, usually through their guild, but also through in-game acquaintances:

When I log in it's usually the same people that I play with –D
It was a group atmosphere I guess. There was a sense of camaraderie... -N
...you wanted people around... -N
We all knew each other as an old soul –N
You definitely form a relationship there –D
It's become much more of a guild oriented game –N
I was involved in an online gaming community. - N
Everybody in the guild has certain people they hang [with] –D

The participants recognized that, for themselves and others they knew in-game, relationships with others were an important part of the experience of the game. They described finding a sense of belonging when they logged in to see familiar guildmates. For some, this was a valued part of their daily routine, a regular place for them to find companionship and support in hard times, while others noted the sense of loss that results from falling out of touch with online friends:

The fact that I was able to get...friends in-game to tell me, you know, it's a natural process. It's what happens. It gave me a release – a pressure release. And it was a good thing. –M
It seems to be a very lonely server nowadays. –N
Very often I'll get together with the friends that I do have now...and just go, 'where has everybody gone?' –N
...logging in the morning, being able to see the same people and, you know, like 'how was work?' –D
I guess that's what keeps me going back, is seeing the same people, and just having that relationship with them. –D

This sense of community and of belonging was so important to some participants that they mentioned their online friendships as major factors in keeping them playing the game:

It's mainly the people you meet. You know, you wanna log in and – you know. –D
It's not the game itself, it's just the people that you meet within the game. –D
Sometimes you see it as a bad relationship – you don't know why you're still in it, but something keeps drawing you back! –N

D returned again and again to the importance of the people he met in keeping him playing the game longer than he thought he would, and while N seemed to have a difficult time pinpointing what 'draws him back,' throughout the interview he spoke about feeling lonely and left out now that many of his Everquest friends no longer play the game, and now that he played less often himself.

While all three participants mentioned the value of their online relationships through Everquest, it should be noted that none of them mentioned these relationships being important in the absence of offline relationships. In fact, all three discussed playing Everquest while in the presence of friends or significant others, sometimes to the exclusion of those others:

My friends, who constantly come over, they'll see me on the computer and they're like "alright, get off the computer now." –M
I was on a floor where all my friends were, and the most we tended to do was sit around watch movies and eat pizza. And that all took place on the TV, so I'm over here watching the movie and playing the game. –N
Well, like, raid, my guild raid generally raids ...all day Saturday, like 8 hours or 9 hours, and then Sunday the same thing. And, uh, for the most part she's just like sitting around watching TV, which I guess she gets bored with. And then she'll start bugging me looking for attention –D

These players did not lack offline "social support," but still regarded online relationships as one of the most attractive aspects of Everquest.

The quality of relationships in Everquest

In exploring the qualities of their online relationships with others, all three reported that they felt they were getting to know real people as they played the game, though one participant was particularly ambivalent about how well one can know another player:

Even though there's still real people behind the game, but I don't really know them. My girlfriend, like she's...there, like a real person. So she should demand more of my attention than the actual game or people I don't even really know. But I've known longer, you know, through the game, but I don't really know them. Like, face to face. -D
But even though people in the game, on the other side of the computer are real, you don't get to see their faces and their expressions. I mean, you can imagine it, they're typing. -D

Despite his ambivalence, D and the other participants addressed the reality of their relationships in Everquest, noting little distinction between Everquest characters and the players behind them:

But it's funny how like someone is always is gonna quit the guild and the game, they'll be like "Oh, real life comes first." Like, you know, this isn't real life or something. It's like, it's funny how people, like separate the two. -D
They're really sitting there behind the computer screen. It's real life with me when I go home and do that. -D
The way she was in-game was the way she was in real life -M
Even though you don't really know the person or see them or recognize them, you can always tell by their personality who they are -D
Even though it's just a computer screen, there's actually real people behind it. -D
I'd say [the relationship is] almost better. I'd put them on the level of an acquaintance from school. -N
I guess with the internet world, with my brother meeting his girlfriend of like 3 years now in the game, I guess it's a moot point if you can't see them or if you can see them. -D

The participants, in thinking about others they encounter in Everquest, imagined they were connecting with another "real person" somewhere, behind his or her computer, and trusted that their experience of this person was essentially similar to meeting face to face.

While they all acknowledged the limitations to this form of interaction, such as the inability to see facial expressions, they at times minimized the effects of these limitations in terms of their ability to form connections with them.

The participants all said they felt they could truly know someone through Everquest, and seemed to assume that minimal differences existed between other players as they encountered them in Everquest and as they might encounter them offline. Nonetheless, they also noted differences in the feeling of interacting through Everquest that colored their online interactions. Some participants felt they were able to be less defended and more open in their conversations online:

There's a little bit of anonymity, because you know that you don't physically know this person. So you can be a little bit more open and honest. –M

Being very forthright and honest, and you can say what you mean without having to sugarcoat it. –M

Um, I'm probably a little more open on Everquest. –N

I'm probably much more prone to meeting people, to actually putting myself out there and meeting new people in-game than I am in real life. –N

With a real life friend, if they're doing something that's wrong, or doing something self-destructive, you know, you're going to try and help them, but to a certain point you're going to pull back because you don't want to hurt your friend. –M

I'd say I'm probably a little more outspoken in-game. –N

He was able to say, straightforward to me, whereas if he was a friend he would probably put in some rationales –M

There is a feeling of being able to talk to someone, who you don't see, who you don't know – well, you know and you don't know – gives you a bit of openness. –M

–M

I'm probably much more prone to meeting people, to actually putting myself out there and meeting new people in-game than I am in real life. –N

The participants that felt a sense of anonymity within the game found that it allowed them to speak more freely, or approach others more easily, than they would offline. For another participant, his style of interaction remained the same across online and offline realms:

Like I'm not an outspoken person within the game, I just am kinda quiet, so that's I guess how I am in real life –D

All participants, whether being online made them feel more open or not, mentioned using Everquest as a forum for discussing issues from their offline lives:

Not so much problem sharing, but you know, good things that go on. And venting, oh I hate my job, etc. chill out, let's go kill a goblin. –N
There are a lot of bikers in our guild, and we'll end up talking about motorcycles. And it's kinda funny, because we'll be in a raid and some guy will be talking about what he did to his sportster to give it a little more umph... –M
...logging in the morning, being able to see the same people and, you know, like "how was work?" I mean we chat, not just about the game, but like, "what do you do?" "Oh I do this." –D

In addition to chatting about everyday life, some participants mentioned using Everquest to find (and give) support and encouragement in times of crisis:

he'll be like "my girl's yelling at me, I don't know what to do – she wants me to get off this stupid game and..." –D
They were able to say to me, "look, you'll go on, you'll continue." I found comfort in that. I really did. –M
And he was like, "you're probably not going to be seeing me for a couple of weeks cause I'm going into rehab." And I was like oh, what are you going for...I just told him about what happened to me and how EQ has...helped me. –D

Again, these participants who drew support from their online friends also mentioned having offline supports in their lives, but found a different kind of help from Everquest friends. M, who mentioned the contrast specifically, noted that the effect of anonymity, allowing people to be more open and direct, seemed to allow his online friends to be more frank with him in considering worst-case outcomes of his crisis.

While the players noted the possibility for less guarded discussion of personal issues within the game, two also noted in particular a preponderance of discussions within the game that focused on in-game happenings:

It's more goal-oriented conversation I suppose, about doing things, even if you're not actually moving. –N

I have a different mindset when I'm in the game than when I'm, you know, doing anything else...it's like, well, "how's the best way to do this? What's the best way to handle the situation?" –M

It's thinking, it's working your way around problem-solving, and it's really interesting to do. –M

I'm a bit of a jokester...but when I'm 'on the clock' as it were, I try and be very professional. –M

what you're constantly doing is, you're keeping quiet, you're listening to what needs to go on and then you try to do your job as well as possible. –M

And I will put my two cents in to help people out, but for the most part I listen to what has to be done then I go and do it -M

The players' logs bore out their assertions that Everquest conversations tend to be focused on the in-game task at hand; all of the logs the participants shared with me featured primarily chat about in-game tasks such as forming groups, planning to attempt a particular quest, or resolving within-game disputes between players. In sections of the logs in which fighting a monster was recorded, there was often no chat at all aside from minimal messages between players directly pertaining to the fight. While players said that one of the things they valued about Everquest relationships was the ability to form open, supportive relationships, most of the logs they shared with me featured little personal disclosure.

Points of contact – online and offline relationships

In terms of the impact of playing Everquest on their offline lives, the participants expressed divergent views – sometimes even within one interview. All three talked about the experience of playing Everquest in the presence of others, with different results. Sometimes, participants described the game as something that disconnects them from current, offline interactions:

when I'm playing the game, it kinda takes me out of reality –D

I've had to turn down things [with offline friends] because a raid was going on or something -M

for the most part she's just like sitting around watching TV, which I guess she gets bored with. And then she'll start bugging me looking for attention –D
I'm in the room, and I'm there with her, but I'm not really there, you know?
There's been times when she has like, asked me something and I just did not hear it. –D
maybe that's her way of like, you know, making me to like, think outside of the game, about food or whatever. To make me make the choice so I turn away from the game or something. –D
My friends...they'll see me on the computer and they're like "alright, get off the computer now." (Laughs) cause they know, if they can't get me off as soon as they get there, there's a pretty good chance I'll stay on. –M

Playing the game, in these cases, made these two participants in some way unavailable to offline others, even those in the same room. Another participant presented a contrasting view when he reported that, for him, the game could be one of many simultaneous modes of interaction:

Dual socialness. –N
I was on a floor where all my friends were, and the most we tended to do was sit around watch movies and eat pizza...so I'm over here watching the movie and playing the game. –N
So one window is EQ and the other is AIM³⁰ and I'm still keeping up with her...(dramatically) She's just another tell! –N

N was apparently able to easily switch back and forth between attending to offline and online friends and even between Everquest and other forms of online interaction.

Finally, participants also noted the ways in which the game sometimes served to connect them to offline others:

Not only is it fun to play with people you know in real life, cause you know, you can just lean over and say hey hon, you wanna do this, or whatever. But it was also fun because she – I got to be a bit of a mentor to her –M
I actually got into it with my brother...and I probably wouldn't have stayed in the game as long if it wasn't for playing with him. –D
[My brother] met a girl online, in the game, that has since moved out here and lives with him, and you know, they formed a relationship. But you know, and that's who I would play with a lot. –D
a real life friend of mine...said, "this is the new game coming out, uh – I really like it, I've had a lot of fun with it, why don't you give it a try?" and...I went over

³⁰ America-Online Instant Messenger

to his place one night and spent about an hour or so making a character, and I really enjoyed it. –M
I could probably set [the computers] up next to each other, that way we could play together. -D

While the game had the potential to isolate the players, they also saw potential to enjoy the game alongside offline friends.

Personal investments

Aside from its impact on offline relationships, another intersection between the online and offline worlds for the participants concerned the feeling of personal pride they took in their online actions. All the participants mentioned the satisfaction they (and other players they knew) took in their in-game accomplishments:

One of the things that we're famous for as a guild, is we will try and do an encounter with as few people as possible. –M
Once my escape has been successful...that's my personal victory for the night. –N
And everybody's like "yeah! Yeah!" typing "yeah!" or "woot!" or something...[you] feel good that you can lead that many people. –D
It's really good to be able to go out and be able to take out these two or three people, and kind of knock them down and brag a little once you're done. –M
You feel real proud of the guild, then you take a screenshot and post it on the website. –D
Everybody kinda like, tracks who's the top guild of all the servers and what they're doing. And there's kinda like a little prestige that goes with it, in the online world. –D
So it becomes almost a Tom and Jerry kind of thing. You know, you run in, you provoke the cat, and start going. Unless you can...take him down with a frying pan...-N
There's definitely a good pride feeling, a prestige that goes with it. -D

Hard-wrought victories within the game gave these participants a feeling of accomplishment that is not confined to the game itself – players posted pictures or stories of their in-game adventures on websites and message boards where they received recognition from others. The pride they took in their ability to work together with others

to reach a goal or their ability to individually overcome adversity seemed to extend beyond the character in the game to the player himself.

Perhaps related to their sense that in-game accomplishments reflected on their own sense of self-worth was the players' understanding of the relationship between their Everquest character and their sense of self in other contexts. Some of them expressed the opinion that their Everquest persona was similar to their own persona in daily life, or that the Everquest character expressed characteristics that the player experienced as part of himself, but that were often unexpressed in his offline life:

I always felt kinda like, I guess more of a diabolical person inside, so I picked the rogue. –D

Like I'm not an outspoken person within the game, I just am kinda quiet, so that's I guess how I am in real life – like that. –D

My character is a parallel to me in certain ways. Because people see him as one thing but he's not. And that's a lot what I am too. –M

At the same time, one participant reported that he experienced his character's persona as very different from his own:

I actually picked him because he was a lot different than I am in real life, you know. These are characters that are, you know, they're thieves, they're always doing questionable stuff. I'm not like that –M

Some participants also talked about ways they felt their experience with their characters had changed their offline experience of themselves:

I kinda project a little of myself onto him, and vice versa. –D

I don't have nearly as many knives as my rogue is wielding-I do have a collection that I've amassed over the years. I'd probably say Everquest spurred me on to that. Rather than having them made me decide to make me into a rogue. –N

In addition to incorporating their offline personas, the players reported that they drew inspiration from fictional characters with whom they identified when they created their Everquest characters:

that movie, uh, you know the one that was in Rome, and he was like a...Gladiator... Yeah, and I was actually, my name was going to be Maximus, after him. -D

I love reading R.A. Salvatore's works. He did the whole Crystal Shard, this character X_, was a dark elf and really was a neat character. I said "boy, wouldn't it be nice to make a character kind of like him." -M

Um, my favorite RPG³¹ at the time was [name of game]...There was this wizard, and then, I suppose the rest is history. -N

All three, then, described their characters as somewhat like themselves and as an appropriation of an idealized fictional character.

Finally, two participants, when discussing their character's persona, paid particular attention to how their character fit in with other characters in Everquest – particularly, they seemed to address the question, 'do others in Everquest need or appreciate me?'

He can't work on his own, but he can just add so much to a group. -M
It's just a little kind of interesting character to play because everybody's constantly saying, "hey, can you help me?" "hey, can you help me?" and I'm like, "sure," you know, "let's do it." -M

Go, meet someone, look for a group, you find someone. Once you click, you click. If not, there's always another group. Usually. Maybe. That's kind of declined in the past months -N

You realize after not long of playing that there's not much else you can do. If you're with a group, then you're added damage...unless they have a damage shield,³² at which point you might as well lie on the ground. -N

It was more of them telling you, you know, you're really pretty much screwed. They really haven't had much love for the tradeskillers.³³ -N

While these two players had divergent experiences of how much their characters were valued within the game (though both play the same class), both clearly desired the respect and esteem of their online peers and would like to be seen as having valuable contributions to make to online others.

³¹ Role-Playing Game

³² Computer-generated monsters that have a damage shield cause damage to players who hit it – N is referring to how quickly his character dies when fighting such creatures.

³³ N is referring to a panel at an Everquest convention. Players who work within the game to improve skills at such trades as baking, armor-making, or brewing are known as tradeskillers.

Summary

The themes occurring across all three interviews seem to come full circle, in that the players all mentioned feeling a part of a community within the game, and also discussed the desire to make valuable contributions to this community. Like the fictional characters that inspired their Everquest personas, they would like to be respected and renowned within the game. In fact, when these players compared and contrasted their online and offline personae, they often focused on their role within their guild or the Everquest community in general. Nonetheless, the relationship between their online and offline identifications was one of the more complex issues to resolve, with some describing feeling very similar across contexts while others felt differences that were not readily apparent when reading their logs. In terms of their communications with others online, being an active member of the online community seems to involve both making personal connections with others through the game as well as reaching in-game goals as part of a group. While the pursuit of being a member in good standing of the Everquest community sometimes interfered with the participants' engaging in offline activities, they all found, or were hopeful that they could find, ways of being in community with a significant other from the offline world alongside their engagement with many online others through Everquest.

Discussion

Chapter 5

As internet connections and internet use become a part of our everyday lives, questions about how we inhabit online spaces warrant attention. Because many writers have raised concerns about the possibilities for identification with disintegrated and possibly destructive aspects of ourselves online (Idhe, 2002; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1997; and Young 1996, 1997) and about the potential weakness of internet relationships compared with offline ones (Cummings et.al., 2002; Foster, 1997; Kraut et.al., 1996, 1998, 2002; Young 1996, 1997), qualitative investigation is needed to understand the particular ways internet users take up these possibilities. Cummings, et. al. (2002) explained:

Understanding the impact of the Internet on human social relationships requires two types of evidence. First, we need to know how computer-mediated communication affects the quality of particular social interactions and relationships....Second, we need to know how computer-mediated communication affects one's mix of social interactions and relationships (p.103).

Much quantitative research has been (and is being) performed on the nature of online interactions, but qualitative interview studies such as this one can help answer the questions above and others with specific life examples. Considering the potential hazards of heavy internet use that other studies have highlighted, what attracts people to spending time online? Do these people desire relationships that are less intense and identification with personae that are very unlike their own? How does their time spent online affect their offline lives? Kraut et.al. (2002) pointed out that quantitative research has a difficult time assessing changes across online and offline lives: “we need better and more

detailed descriptions of how people spend their time, both on-line and off, to relate these detailed descriptions to changes in important domains in life” (p.71).

This study offers a small window into the concrete details of three heavy internet users’ lives. Particularly, it offers a look into the experience of people who use the internet particularly for interacting with others in a fantasy role-play setting. That is, rather than surfing the web, emailing offline acquaintances, or participating in asynchronous communication such as online message boards, these participants discussed using the internet to interact real-time with others while playing a game that encouraged fantasy. Their experiences, as shared in these interviews, shed light on questions about the nature and function of relationships in Everquest and the dialogue between player and character, including questions about player’s experience of creating an Everquest persona. Though the details of these interviews are specific to these three players and to Everquest, they may provide a starting-point or structure for thinking about a broader range of online experiences for diverse people.

This chapter will focus first on two major areas of our discussions – certainly interests that I brought to the interviews, but also topics that the participants each spoke of at length. First, we will explore the sense of Everquest as an online community. The participants each described feeling a part of a social group online, and I will address their sense of the benefits and boundaries of these relationships, together with the empirical literature’s understanding of such communities. I will also consider the function of these relationships in the participants’ lives, drawing on theoretical literature to suggest a synthesis of the participants’ ambivalent experience of the boundaries of connections with others in Everquest and empirical reports that online relationships are detrimental to

offline social support. Finally, I will discuss the problem of measuring the experience of relationships in a game like Everquest against the experience of face-to-face relationships and suggest the benefits of approaching the game as its own reality, rather than an extension of everyday life.

Second, I will discuss the participants' experiences of forming an online persona, again in light of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. In light of the cyborg and prosthesis literature, I will discuss the question of whether these players desired to be integrated with their characters in a lasting sense, and where they perceived the boundaries between player and character to be. I will explore the players' tendencies to focus on one character rather than many, and characters who were similar to, not opposite from, their offline personas. In exploring the ways in which the participants took advantage of the online format to try out new or altered ways of representing themselves and behaving with others, I will use psychodynamic theory, particularly drawing on Lacan and Freud, to offer an explanation of the forces guiding, or even constraining, the participants, in an online format which would seem to offer a great deal of freedom to create a 'new self.'

Finally, I will consider the limitations of my study. These will include limits in study design and execution as well as points that were not fully explored in this report and questions that remain for further research. I will also reflect on my impact as researcher in the execution of this study.

Community in Everquest

In response to my overarching question, "what draws people to spend so much time playing Everquest that their other pursuits might be jeopardized?" the participants

answered clearly: the people. All three participants felt a clear appreciation for the social nature of the game; it opened up to all of them a sense of community and companionship that was available every day, any time of day. For D, who worked a potentially isolating night job, Everquest offered a chance for daily, regular socialization that might have been difficult to find otherwise. Because the internet, and Everquest in particular, put him in touch with people from other time zones, D was able to visit with a daily “crowd” the way others might stop at a café or bar after working a day job. For the others, Everquest was simply one means among others of making social contacts, though certainly it had its differences from offline interactions. For example, in addition to being a community that is assembled and accessible 24 hours a day, Everquest is unlike most offline communities of adults in that very large groups of people frequently come together in raids to work toward the same goal. Most people rarely experience a gathering of 75 like-minded individuals working together in the offline world.

Comparing Everquest to offline communities

Young (1997) found that many internet “addicts” went online to find social support, and commented that the deterioration of our everyday communities might contribute to this movement: “the need for social support may be higher in our society due to the disintegration of traditional community-based neighborhoods and the growing rate of divorce, remarriage, and relocation” (p.5). From a the view of the mainstream literature, Everquest players are looking online for a substitute for offline socialization, and while the need for community may be a common one in our society, Young and other researchers have argued that the internet is not the best place to find this connection. Quantitative research has suggested, comparing offline relationships with online ones,

that while developing strong relationships online is possible, it is comparatively rare (Kraut et. al., 2002), that online relationships are generally weaker than offline ones (Cummings et. al., 2002), and that people tend to use the internet more to keep up with relationships that were originally formed offline than to form new ones online (Kraut et. al. 1996; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). We have also heard other mainstream authors (Young, 1997 and Rheingold, 2000) judge online relationships as harmful, or at least sub-standard, compared with face-to-face ones. The mainstream empirical literature, then, would indicate that forming new relationships with others online is less desirable and less common than using online contact as a supplement for face to face or non-computer-mediated interactions.

While all three subjects in this study did mention maintaining other forms of offline social support, and two mentioned occasionally playing the game with people they knew from their offline lives (M's friend who introduced him to the game, or D's brother), all three seemed to spend most of their online time socializing with players who they did not know in other contexts. Maintaining existing social ties was only part of the attraction of the game as a social forum, and each had some social supports that were unconnected to Everquest. Nonetheless, the participants clearly valued the way Everquest functioned as a community for them; as D explained, when discussing why he has played Everquest for so long, "It's not the game itself, it's just the people that you meet within the game."

In fact, one could say that the people *are* the game. These players returned again and again to the importance of their online relationships. M mentioned that he enjoyed meeting new people through Everquest who he might not know otherwise and having a

friends list³⁴ populated by people from many different parts of the world: “It’s interesting because you get a real kind of a melting pot view.” D, whose night shift meant he was just leaving work at the time that most people near him are beginning their workday, was able to find daily social interaction through Everquest because he could spend time playing with people in Australia. He described an enduring relationship with them, with regular daily contact. He even imagined during our interview that these friends were wondering why he was not online as usual. While quantitative research suggested that online friendships were rarely as strong as offline ones, (Kraut et.al., 2002), certainly D seemed strongly connected to his Australian friends in the sense that they interacted daily and had discussions that were not limited to game-related topics. Similarly, N described feeling meaningfully connected to his Everquest ‘wife,’ though he declined to share many details about their becoming friends through the game.

Limits and ambivalence in Everquest relationships

While these players experienced significant feelings of connection to their online friends, some of the limitations of their Everquest relationships became clear through their interviews. All three participants mentioned feeling somewhat anonymous while they played, which allowed some of them to behave in ways that they might not offline. For example, M noted that he might not have been as blunt with the player who talked to him about using cocaine if he were an offline friend, and that his online friends might not have discussed the possibility of his father dying so straightforwardly, but might have tried to put on the best face as his offline friends did. D noted the tendency of some players to be ruder to others online than they would offline, and N remarked that he felt

³⁴ A player can add other players to his friends list, which he can use to quickly check for others who are currently online.

more able to approach others online because of the anonymous feel. In the case of being rude or abrasive to others online, it would seem that Young (1997) is right; one cannot translate this activity into the offline world and hope to win friends. D noted, however, that this sort of rudeness does not pass muster online either; people who behave poorly in Everquest develop a reputation with other players, who will sometimes refuse to interact with them. D's assumption that rude behavior leads to being ostracized by the Everquest community and that kind behavior will be rewarded seems to support the mainstream literature in that Kraut and colleagues (2002) noted that people with more social supports offline (presumably those with better social skills), increased their social circles online and felt less lonely with increased online activity, whereas those with less social support offline also enjoyed less success online, becoming lonelier (p.67-9). The examples M and N gave of behaving differently online, for example, might actually foster good social relationships if the players adopted these styles of interaction offline. Even though M noted that he would not be as honest and open with others offline for fear of damaging the relationship, in fact, he reported feeling *more* supported by his online friends when his father was sick because they were willing to openly discuss the possibility that he would die. In this sense, the data support Turkle's notion that role-playing games could be "psychologically constructive" in that players can use them to "engage with some of the most important issues in...life and to reach new emotional resolutions" (1997, p.188). Players can find support and learn to provide it to others. Approaching others within the game for game-related tasks could help players approach others and express desires more easily and effectively offline.

While the impact of in-game relationships might be far-reaching, the relationships themselves often are not; the players all commented with ambivalence on the circumscribed nature of their Everquest relationships. All three mentioned a sense of anonymity when interacting online, which was part of what allowed them to try on new ways of interacting. Players also commented on the ways in which this anonymity can be frustrating. N described in powerful terms his frustration that players are so untraceable outside the game that quitting the game as permanent a loss as dying.

Limits and ambivalence, online and off

The participants' descriptions of the limitations of Everquest relationships bring to mind Gergen's (2000) discussion of the "fractional relationship" (p.178). The purpose of this relationship, according to Gergen, is to limit one's engagement with an other to a particular aspect of oneself. Gergen noted all sorts of arenas in which people currently engage in fractional relationships in addition to the internet and wrote that in this sort of relationship, "One needn't worry that 'this is only a misleading token of who I am,' for in the context only a partial, provisional self counts." (p.179). Clearly, however, the participants in this study were ambivalent about the limited nature of their Everquest relationships. N expressed feelings of grief over the loss of friends who used to play with him, yet felt it was "weird" to meet other players face-to-face at a fan faire. M reported ambivalent feelings when an Everquest friend revealed that she lived in the same state and offered to meet up with him: "for the longest time I was sort of back and forth about whether I should do it because you know, to a certain extent...there's expectations that get built up. You know, what if I meet her and she's...not someone I would ever talk with and maybe she feels the same way when she meets me." M noted that, in the end,

he did decide to meet this woman, and though he enjoyed spending time with her, they did not meet face to face again. These participants in this study, then, were not committed to a play of identity and relationship as Gergen (2000) suggested; rather, they were unsure of where the boundaries in these relationships should be – they wanted and did not want to extend their experience of Everquest relationships into their offline lives.

Baudrillard's understanding of simulations and the hyperreal might offer more insight into the function of limited relationships found in virtual worlds like Everquest. Baudrillard (1994) described another virtual world, Disneyland, as a “simulation of the third order,” meaning “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country” (p.12). Disneyland, by appearing as false or imaginary, allows us to believe that the country that surrounds it is real, whereas in fact, Baudrillard argued, Los Angeles and the rest of America “are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and of the order of simulation” (p.12). Disneyland and the United States are both caught up in the play of simulation; neither is the real that the other references. Because we take Disneyland for fantasy, however, the rest of America becomes more real: “the imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp” (p.13). From the perspective of Baudrillard, then, we can see that one function of the fractional relationship might be to perpetuate the belief that our other relationships are less fractional! We can see an example of this in N's comparison of loss of an Everquest friend versus loss of a childhood friend. His idea that he could “always find [childhood friends] again” is a fantasy made more real by the belief that it would be near impossible to find “Bob from the Cazic server” because the information N had about him was not ‘real.’

Perhaps concern over online relationships being false, impermanent, or somehow inhibiting healthy social functioning serves to obscure the ways in which our everyday relationships also feel troublingly impermanent and unreal. As Gergen (2000) pointed out, our society fosters short-lived connections with distant people in many forums, not only online. We have also heard Young's suggestion that our communities are disintegrating as we are able to more quickly change homes, jobs, marriages, though she argued that the internet was not a viable way of maintaining "proper socialization" (1997). D's interview provided a striking example of the difficulty of distinguishing which relationships are "real." He described feeling torn in his daily life between devoting time to Everquest or to his girlfriend. While he insisted several times that his relationship with his girlfriend was "real" or that she deserved more of his time than Everquest friends, he spontaneously added ways in which his Everquest friends were more "real": he had known them longer, he could imagine how they look or what they are feeling, even if he could not see them, they can provide the same feeling of a "natural high" that he gets from spending time with his girlfriend. D also discussed his relationship, online and off, with his brother and brother's wife, who lived in another state. He bemoaned their quitting Everquest, thus cutting off one way of keeping in touch with them. Though most would not argue that keeping in touch with one's family interferes with "proper socialization," the distance between them meant that only a fractional relationship was available to D and his brother. N also identified situations of blending of the real and simulations when he described talking to Everquest friends in one window and his girlfriend in the other, where she was "just another tell." In many realms, our relationships with others are becoming more circumscribed, more temporary,

more limited. For Everquest players and for those who write of the social damage done by games like Everquest, isolating the problem to the realm of the game obscures our awareness of the ways our everyday relationships are changing.

Everquest as separate social reality

Baudrillard's (1981, 1983, and 1994) concept of hyperreality, and the experience of these participants, provides another critique of the mainstream literature on the suitability of online relationships compared with face-to-face ones. If we recall that the hyperreal no longer refers to a real at all, and that in a semiurgic society such as our own, the hyperreal may become the model through which we understand our experience (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.119), it becomes problematic to use offline experience as the standard against which we measure online experience. Everquest does not approximate offline life – it is its own reality. These players, when negotiating the types of relationships they wished to have through Everquest, did not strive for the same sorts of friendships (or marriages, in N's case) that they might find offline. Especially when the question of offline, face-to-face contact arose, through Fan Faires or offline meetings, they seemed to be forging a different kind of relating that was not based on typical offline relationships.

Rather than offline experience structuring online, we might expect that Everquest and other online, hyperreal experiences might begin to structure our offline ways of relating. This was certainly the case in N's Fan Faire, where attendees maintained the roles and even the language of the game in face-to-face interactions. The hyperreality of the online world may also become the standard for dating relationships; people using online dating services have shared with me anecdotal stories of dates set up through dating sites ending abruptly and unconventionally. In one example, as a couple who met

online were walking down a street when one dater, spontaneously and without explanation, hailed a cab and left. Presumably, he or she thought the date was not going well, and simply “logged off!” This sort of abrupt ending brings to mind N’s ways of “sneaking” out of unpleasant online conversations, such as claiming that he went linkdead.

The important point about these behaviors, online and off, is that they might be most fruitfully understood in terms of online behavior, not of offline. By the standards of face-to-face relating, ending an interpersonal encounter abruptly and without excuse or explanation is usually considered rude or awkward at the very least. The reason N is able to effectively use going linkdead as an excuse to get out of conversations, however, is that conversations do not operate in the same way in Everquest. Going linkdead or missing a “tell” is a common phenomenon. In fact, M also highlights this truth of online conversation when he noted that he learned to be succinct online because it was so easy for his tells to get lost in the chatter. If we use the standards of offline conversation to analyze Everquest interactions, one could suppose that these interactions are disjointed, less “deep” than offline interactions, or that they do not facilitate a relationship between people. From this perspective, it would be very difficult indeed to understand why some people would find this sort of interaction attractive. By regarding Everquest as its own reality with its own kind of relating, we may attempt to understand experiences in Everquest on their own terms, rather than as some poor substitute for face-to-face experiences.

Identity in Everquest

Tools, prosthesis, cyborgs – the integration of Everquest experience

We might understand more about the ways in which Everquest forges its own reality by turning to the phenomenological and cyborg literature in light of this study's findings. According to the literature, several options existed for the players in terms of their relationship with their characters. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) work on adapting to tools through habit suggested that the players might use their characters as a tool to enter this online world, much as we might use a car to travel to places we otherwise couldn't. This tool, the Everquest character, becomes absorbed into the lived sense of the body in order to be used effectively, and in doing so does alter our experience of our bodies, but the change lasts only as long as our engagement with the tool. By contrast, cyborg theorists explored the ways in which our relationship to technology as prosthesis or cyborg can lead to a change in what it means to be human. Virilio (1995) and Haraway (2004), both saw in technology a movement away from the human body as we currently experience it, in which the boundaries between the technological and the human are blurred. Virilio in particular saw this outcome as something to be feared, in which the body would be colonized and overwhelmed by micro-technology. Haraway, on the other hand, saw the possibility for a purposeful and liberating union with technology, which might allow us to overcome certain dualisms and hierarchies of the current human condition.

In this study, though none of the players spoke explicitly about their wish or lack thereof to merge with their Everquest character, the players did give some indication of their feelings about the boundaries between player and character, game and offline life.

D, in particular, spoke at length about whether or not he “should” be spending as much time online as he does. He clearly felt it was problematic when he was “really heavily into the game” and it became “all [he] would...think about.” At this time, he described a blurring of character and player that might seem to approach a cyborg existence meeting of human and technology as described by Haraway (2004), wherein “I kinda project a little of myself onto him, and vice versa.” D seemed to be the closest of any of the participants to endorsing something like a cyborg existence in the game, wherein there was something of a give and take between character and player. It seems, however, that when D reported that he and the character both “project” onto each other, that the movement is more from D to the character. By D’s own report, the influence of technology on him came in the form of his reading Everquest-related message boards at work, rather than confining his thinking about the game to his free time, and he found this to be an indication that he was too involved in the game.

Rather, D preferred to think of the game as a “hobby” that was relaxing and also helped him enjoy time with others without going to bars, where he might be tempted to drink. The others similarly described the game as a pastime; M compared his interest in Everquest to his girlfriend’s in opera, and noted that they both participated in the other’s favorite form of entertainment. For N, it was clear that Everquest was one form among many of being social. If we think of the Everquest character first as a tool in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) sense, none of the characters expressed a desire to be permanently equipped in the manner of a prosthesis. Though some, like M, could identify ways that Everquest had influenced their lives in a helpful way, they all seemed to prefer that their Everquest character remain in the game, and that their everyday lives be separate. D did

not want to think about the game at work, and N noted that one of the reasons he did not play as much anymore was that he and his roommates began using his computer to watch DVDs, preventing him from watching films and playing Everquest at the same time.

Though Everquest was an important part of their lives, these participants seemed to prefer that it remain an experience that was distinct from other aspects of their lives. Even while playing the game, few seemed to desire the sort of integration that Haraway's (2004) image of the cyborg represents. Similarly, none described a sense that Everquest players were escaping the hierarchical structures present in our society through the game, though admittedly these participants, as Caucasian males, did not represent traditionally undervalued groups.

It could still be argued, as each player seemed to be very invested in the world of Everquest which they accessed via identification with their characters, that this temporary but frequent integration with their characters and the game is a step toward the colonization of the body by technological prostheses that Virilio (1995) feared. In fact, D's description of the way Everquest "calms [him] down" and "mellows [him] out," thus helping him resist the urge to drink or use drugs, calls to mind Virilio's prediction that "technologies of stimulation" (p.101) might soon replace chemical means of mood alteration. Nonetheless, this study indicates that these Everquest players do not wish to alter the boundaries between game and not-game, or to have their Everquest experience somehow transplanted into them.

Many or few identifications?

Given that these players did not wish to enter into a cyborg existence with their characters, but to preserve a separation between their offline and Everquest experience,

how did they approach the tool or temporary prosthesis that allowed them access to the Everquest world? Everquest presented these players with the task of creating a persona almost from scratch, and the literature is full of ideas about what they might have done with that opportunity. Where these players had the opportunity to play one character or many, to take on a persona that was very different from or similar to their own, all three chose one character that was, more or less, like their offline a persona.

While Everquest offers players the option to create many different characters, all three participants actively played only one. The attachment to their particular character is in keeping with a study of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) nicknames³⁵ that found that most subjects rarely changed names, but focused on establishing and maintaining one particular IRC identity, even though changing nicknames was quite easy (Bechar-Israeli, 1996). These subjects were not using Everquest as a ground for trying out many different personalities, though technologically the means were available to do so.

Both Gergen (2000) and Baudrillard (1981, 1983, 1994) supposed that, in a situation in which the boundaries between the real and simulation are collapsed, humankind would be free to collapse traditional boundaries of identification. For Gergen, this would constitute a joyous play of identity in which one dons and doffs roles as they suit the subject. For Baudrillard, however, this endless simulation without reference to the real would ultimately lead to endless, empty repetition where all possibilities have already been played out and perfected. The participants in this study were certainly not examples of Gergen's pastiche personality. Rather, the situation may be more like Baudrillard's grim vision of the "futureless future" of the semiurgic society (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.134). The players had the choice of many different storybook

³⁵ An IRC nickname appears next to any lines the user types, identifying him or her to others.

characters, and they were not limited to one; they could have created several different characters and switched between them. If they did not want to bother to gain experience at a variety of character classes, they could have bought various powerful characters at an online auction site. From Gergen's perspective it might be shocking that these participants did none of these, but devoted years of play to the same character. Using Baudrillard's concept of deterrence, however, one might make sense of these player's choice not to take advantage of the multiple possibilities available to them. The situation in Everquest, in which one can choose from dozens of characters, each as powerful and heroic as the next, mirrors Baudrillard's image of the end of history, when "all is finished, perfected, and doomed to infinite repetition" (Best and Kellner, 1991, p.134). Hundreds, maybe thousands of players have already been that brave warrior or wise mage, and these characters are just as much at my participant's fingertips as they are at any others'. How then, did these players choose the particular character to which they would devote almost all of their Everquest time?

Which identifications to choose?

Sherry Turkle (1995) reported that some role-players use the internet to "be a better version of [themselves]" (p. 193). Wallace (1999) also wrote that, while the internet provides a prime forum for trying out new identities, "many people stay close to their home self and just tinker with a few traits they wish they could improve" (pp.48-9). Similarly, the subjects in this study used Everquest as a means of identification with idealized aspects of self or others and as a place to play out conflicts that may have been present in offline life.

Each said they felt their characters were like their offline selves intermingled with aspects of fictional people whom they admired. For example, D described feeling that his character expressed something of the “diabolical person” he feels he is “inside” and notes that he drew inspiration for the name from a hero in a movie. Despite the character’s “diabolical” nature, D also noted that he tried to treat everyone he meets in-game kindly so they “remember [him] as a helpful person,” preserving his good reputation.

Young (1997), in her study of internet “dependents,” found that one of the main attractions for heavy internet users was the ability to create an online persona, which the “dependent” uses to “transform himself mentally into a new person on-line.” She wrote, “most times, an on-line persona is a paradox of one’s real life.” The players in this study did mention ways they thought they behaved differently in Everquest than they could in their offline lives. For instance, M reported that at work he is often a leader and problem-solver, but in Everquest he enjoyed feeling that he could sit back and be a follower. Similarly, N reported that it was easier for him to approach new people in-game, where the risk of rejection is lower. Even in instances when the subjects pointed out ways they felt they behaved differently in Everquest, however, their own examples, or their logged gameplay, proved their online and offline behavior to be very similar. While M claimed to enjoy being a follower in Everquest, he seemed to contradict himself later in the interview, when he discussed how much he enjoys the problem-solving aspects of the game. His log also showed him to be quite an active presence in his group. N said he did not often approach new people offline, but found this easier in Everquest, however on further exploration, we discovered that he did not often approach new people in the game either, but tended to wait for others to call for players to join them in groups or

adventures. Though I did not have access to much information about these players' offline lives, the differences they described did not seem to be paradoxical, as Young supposed, but recalled Wallace's observation about online personae: "many of these new identities may simply add a bit of polish or mystery to the self we already know in real life, and these experimental enhancements may lead to very positive consequences" (1999, p. 54).

Rather than trying on different personas to suit varying encounters with others, or taking on a persona that is opposite that of their daily lives, these players acted out one particular variant on their own identity across all their online interactions. This would seem to support a psychodynamic view of identity formation online. Remember Lacan's argument that a way is laid out for the child's identifications before he or she is born in the language interested adults use about him or her (Fink, 1995). This language speaks of the desires and expectations the Other has of the child, becoming the groundwork for the ego-ideal, which he or she will work to meet (Fink, 1995; Lacan, **2005**). The neurotic, in Lacan's understanding, is always trying to be recognized by the Other as living up to this ego-ideal – in work, at home, and in any other aspect of life. These players brought their ego-ideals with them into the Everquest world, just as they would into any other interaction. Just as parents' expectations lay the foundation for the neurotic's adoption of an ego-ideal, the players' personal histories guided their character formation in Everquest, influencing their choices to amplify or alter certain parts of their personalities and to draw on particular aspects of fictional characters they admire. We might view the players' character formation in Everquest, then, as a technologically-enabled example of the constant struggle to bridge the gap between our current estimation of ourselves and

who we would like to be (the ideal ego) that is common to all neurotics (Lacan, **2005**). If the players could take on these idealized personas well enough, they might accomplish the neurotic's goal of having the Other (i.e., other players in the game) reflect back to him that he embodies the ideals he is striving toward.

This effort to see oneself as the ego-ideal through the other could be seen particularly well in M's story of his own character. M at first reported that his character was very unlike himself because it was a thief and did "questionable stuff." He later described, though, that his character only seemed to be evil, but was actually good. In fact, M had enacted this evil-to-good shift within the game mechanics, choosing a character that belonged to an 'evil race' and working within the game (through quests, etc.) to become accepted by the 'good races' of non-player characters.³⁶ M later talked about how this movement from a seemingly bad character into a good one mirrored his own efforts in life to be perceived as "laid back" despite often being seen as a "Cro-Magnon," due to his imposing physical presence. If M's goal was simply to be perceived within the game mechanics as kind and good, he could have created a character of a 'good' race, but it seems the enactment of being perceived as threatening and bad and proving himself to be a 'good guy,' just as often happened in his offline life, was meaningful to him. His example provided an interesting counterpoint to Young's (1997) argument against online interactions informing offline ones; she wrote that in the online world, markers of our age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status "die into the background as all virtual inhabitants are created equal" (p.5). When we return to the

³⁶ In Everquest, different fantasy races inhabit different cities. Each city is guarded by non-player characters (i.e. run by the program, not another player). Guards in 'good' cities will attack any 'evil' characters who approach, and vice versa, but determined players can do certain in-game tasks to change their moral standing so they can peacefully enter cities they once could not.

offline world, she said, “real world inequalities enter into the picture - it becomes difficult to transfer this virtually acquired behavior” (p.5). M, however, carried markers of the very attributes that cause him the most trouble offline into Everquest; rather than use the technology to abandon this issue of his misleading appearance, he continued to play out this conflict through the game. Furthermore, of all the participants, M remarked most specifically about the things he has learned in-game that have helped him in everyday life, such as being succinct in his words in raids and in business.

In creating their online personas, then, these subjects were likely continuing an effort to realize some ideal that was common to their offline lives. The particulars of their attempts to reconcile with a particular ego-ideal might also be seen in the ways the players related to their character’s class. By chance, all three subjects played the same class of character – a rogue³⁷ – but an interesting difference emerged in the ways the players felt about their class. Both D and M especially described feeling that their character was important and valued. M noted particular skills his character had because of being a rogue, and felt that these skills gave him a special place in a group or a raid. D, similarly, spoke about feeling as though he were letting his guild down if he were not present for a raid. N, however, returned again and again during the interview to the ways he felt “screwed” in the game, usually because of the weaknesses of his character’s class. He talked about how difficult it was for him to survive in fights, that his only viable option in fights with other players was to run away, and hinted that it was difficult for

³⁷ It is still unclear to me why rogues in particular happened to respond to my request for volunteers and follow through with plans to meet with me. Perhaps these players, who chose mysterious and secretive characters in Everquest were interested in the opportunity to indulge in more exhibitionist activity. Perhaps, considering that all three participants responded to the same post I made on a rogue-specific message board, there is something about the culture of that particular message board that is more trusting or personable.

him to find groups who wanted his help. Again, contrary to Young's assertion that we use the internet to leave behind aspects of ourselves that we dislike, we might guess that N was working on a conflict from offline life in Everquest; if his goal was simply to feel powerful and not "screwed," he could have easily chosen to play another class.

While the participants generally did not behave very differently than they would offline, Everquest is, of course, a fantasy game in which characters have fantastic abilities or characteristics. N noted that he did not have "nearly as many knives as [his] rogue is wielding," for example. One of the notable ways in which the players identified with a fantasized Other was by incorporating aspects of idealized fictional characters; all three referred to fictional characters from whom they drew inspiration for their online personas. M referenced a character from a favorite book, D, a movie, and N, another fantasy game. Armed with these identifications with idealized others and with fantastic character traits, some players noticed ways in which they felt different in the game. M reported he felt more able to be bluntly honest with others without fear of damaging the relationship, as in his examples of talking with the friend who was using cocaine and discussing his father's ailing health. While he noted that with offline friends "You're going to pull back because you don't want to hurt your friend," he noted that he found this sort of frank conversation helpful in times of crisis. D also noticed that he tends to handle anger differently online because he "a little more guts to" stand up for himself. He described a situation in which he was unable to stop a customer at his workplace from mistreating one of the copy machines, contrasted with a situation online when he spoke out against guild leaders who were mistreating the rest of the guild. D remembered getting support from other guild members for "calling them on it."

Because both players saw these differences in behavior as positive, one might guess that being more straightforward and more assertive are also aspects of these players' ego-ideals. Neither example, though, indicates that the players behaved in ways that were antithetical to their offline ways of being. Again, contrary to Young's (1997) assertion that internet users' online identities tend to be opposed to their offline personae, the change in these cases was more subtle. M did not "pull back" as much in conversation as he might usually. For D, the change seemed to concern the effects of his behavior – he perceived his examples from work and Everquest of getting angry to demonstrate "generally how I am in life. If something's not right, then, you know, I'll speak up about it." Online, it seems he met with better results in that he was heard and got support from his guild, whereas with the unruly customer at work, he resigned to "let the other girl deal with her... 'cause I couldn't deal with her."

Both of the examples given also highlight the importance of the Other's recognition of the players' identifications. Just as the initial formation of the ego-ideal relies on the approving gaze of the parent, the neurotic later depends on the affirming recognition to confirm that he or she is approaching the ideals set out for him or her (Lacan, **2005**, p.652, 659). M's enactment of a straightforward, good-hearted person in a somewhat intimidating package, D's experience of effectively asserting himself, and N's Everquest friendships and marriage depended on the presence of others who, in their responses to the participants, confirmed their fantasy identity, their approximation of the ego-ideal.

These participants used Everquest to approximate their ego-ideals in a way they could not offline, and received immediate recognition from an ever-present Other. This

understanding of their identifications and interactions, however, is distinct from the idea put forth by writers like Young (1997), who asserted that the internet user creates a powerful, attractive identity that is the opposite of their weak, awkward offline presence. Psychodynamic theory helps us understand that players are not so free of their own history to be able to create a persona from scratch; a person who enacts a Machiavellian character online is likely to be just as power-hungry offline, though the available means of expression may differ. Likewise, a person who considers himself a sort of ‘gentle giant’ in offline life like M is unlikely to let his aggressive urges run amok in Everquest.

Questions for further research and limitations of this study

Finally, I would like to consider some of the limitations of my own work, and some questions that remain unanswered. First, I will consider my own impact as researcher on the project and the ways my attitudes and interests influenced the project, including my choice of focus in the discussion. I will also acknowledge a particular limitation of the study design and suggest possibilities for working around this limitation in future research. Third, I will discuss possible meanings of the limited sample in this study, and finally, outline some questions for further research that remain unanswered.

As mentioned before, my personal and theoretical interests were bound to color my research. As Walsh (1995) explains, “What comes into view [in research] is shaped by, and comprehended through, those presuppositions” the researcher has (p.336). This project was inescapably my own, and my personality, interests, and status as a former Everquest player could not help but affect the participants’ reactions to me and the responses they gave during the interviews – another researcher, even with the same participants, would have produced a different set of data. Even given the same

interviews, another researcher might have found other items of interest and drawn other conclusions about them. The data and my analysis of them were co-constituted with my participants.

Looking back on the process of my research, I realize that I began this project with the hope to find something positive about internet interactions and identity formation. Though I certainly believed that time spent in Everquest could become a significant problem, and perhaps an symptom of other conflicts in one's life, as someone who had enjoyed the game and felt close to people I met online, I wanted to argue against views like Young's (1996, 1997) that seemed to pathologize even casual players like myself who believed their online friendships were real. About midway through this project, I stopped playing the game due to other time constraints, and thus lost contact with my Everquest friends. At first, I felt something very like the feeling of grief N described for his friends who had stopped playing; I felt as if I had lost a group of friends at once. I never heard from any of them again. Though I certainly felt sad at this loss, moving away from Everquest as a player helped me realize that I wanted to move to a more neutral stance regarding my data. I felt less that I wanted to say something 'good' or 'bad' about Everquest players or online identity and interaction in general, but to think more nonjudgementally about what structural aspects of Everquest use seemed to be emerging in my interviews. In this way, I felt more able to present a synthesis with the literature that does not claim to offer a last word on ways that the internet is good or bad for us psychologically or as a society, but offers ways of understanding players' experiences of themselves and others online.

My own interests and background also influenced this project in my choice of which points to explore in interviews and which interview material to focus on in my discussion. The participants brought up many interesting ideas on which I did not follow up, but which might be of interest to other researchers. For example, D spoke about the way Everquest functions as a sort of harm reduction plan for addiction management; he feels he is addicted to Everquest, but finds this addiction less harmful than his former drug and alcohol use. D also discussed his bodily involvement in Everquest versus his offline life, which might have been fruitfully elaborated. In his efforts to establish how Everquest and face-to-face relationships were different, he stumbled upon a bodily feeling that was different about the relationships; feeling in love with his girlfriend and succeeding on a guild raid could both make him feel “a natural high,” but the feeling following a raid was “superficial” and “short-lived.” That D would report having bodily reactions to situations in Everquest is not surprising; remember Merleau-Ponty’s description of the ways instruments may be incorporated as feeling portions of our own body:

To get used to a hat, a car, or a [walking] stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments (1962, p.143).

D was the only one to talk specifically about the ways he had ‘dilated his being-in-the-world’ through the game, but one might presume that, had I asked, the other participants might have reported similar experiences.

Another limitation of this study concerned an aspect of the design. In the analysis and discussion I was interested in part with the ways the players’ own dynamics were played out in the forum of the game, however in the short interviews I conducted, I was

privity only to the perspective of the participants' observing egos. My theorizing that the participants used the process of online character creation to approximate the ego-ideal was based on the players' own descriptions of who they consider themselves to be, and how they considered their characters to be like or unlike themselves. However, because some of the expectations and desires of the Other which make up the ego-ideal are unconscious in that they are part of the language of the Other (Fink, 1995, p.10-11), any understanding based on the participants' self-reports would be severely compromised. The only access I had to unconscious dynamics was in observing their behavior through the game logs, and even in this case, the players were able to choose what sort of log to give me – a raid, in which they speak very little with other players, or a log of a less structured situation in which they had more opportunity for interaction. A case-study approach, drawing on material from a therapy case, would likely be more helpful in learning in detail about the dynamic between player and character in general, and the interaction between the player's actual sense of himself and the ego-ideal in online identity formation in particular. Other possibilities for exploring the unconscious with a non-clinical population might include using psychological testing (projective or objective personality measures) to provide a fuller understanding of the participant's own dynamics to compare to his or her description of his or her Everquest persona.

Another limitation of this study concerned the sample. This sample was entirely from a non-clinical population; the participants were all solicited from Everquest-related message boards, and none of them volunteered that they were in treatment. A clinical case study approach to this topic might provide interesting insight into the role of online games like Everquest in a psychiatric population. As mentioned before, treatment centers

already exist for “internet addiction,” and anecdotal reports suggest that patients are beginning to present in all sorts of treatment settings with heavy internet use as part of their clinical picture. Are the attractions to the game different for a clinical population? How does immersion in a game like Everquest maintain or contribute to psychiatric symptoms? The interviews with these three participants provided some hints about potential areas of trouble. For example, D’s weekly fights with his live-in girlfriend that resulted in silence and avoidance provided a powerful example of the potential for interpersonal conflict that may be created with significant others. D also mentioned once calling in sick to work so he could play the game, and N attributed his failing a semester’s classes to spending too much time on the game. Again, these participants were from a non-clinical setting – more adept, we might guess, than a clinical population, at managing the conflicting demands of work or school and Everquest. These players also had generally positive, rewarding experiences of acting out their ego-ideals online, but for others, trying to attain that ideal might be more problematic. The existence of a number of websites encouraging eating disorders attests to the potential of the internet to bring people together to enact more damaging fantasies. Again, a study focusing on a clinical population would elucidate the ways engagement with Everquest could become less pastime and more a symptom.

Finally, this study was limited in the diversity of its sample. Though I solicited participants on a variety of online message boards and hoped to find a diverse group, all my participants were alike in several ways: all were male, Caucasian, and all played the same class of character. Even when I asked my participants if they could refer me to a female player to interview, none could be found, and one participant commented that he

supposed it would be much more difficult for me to find a woman who played Everquest, as he perceived them to be less common than male players. Another study of Everquest players supported this player's suspicion: in Yee's 2000 survey study, only 13% identified as female. While my findings regarding the unconscious dynamics being played out in the game and the fractional nature of online relationships could as easily apply to women as men, further study might reveal whether women are attracted (or not attracted) to the game for different reasons. Further study would also be helpful in identifying ways that players who choose characters of other classes think of themselves and interact with others differently, as all three of my participants chose to play rogues. If the idea that these players are enacting some part of their ego-ideals holds true, one might expect that players who chose different classes are aspiring toward different ideals, and we might also expect that the Everquest rogue would appeal to a particular segment of the online gaming population.

In addition to providing a broader sample, further study might help make more meaning of the findings of this study. In what specific ways are internet relationships, with all their shortcomings, mirroring limitations in our offline relationships the way Disneyland mirrors and masks the fantasies that exist in our everyday world? If we are increasingly engaging in "fractional relationships" online and off, how will this change us personally and as a culture? Gergen (2000) suggested that the fractional relationship can bring with it both a sadness at the loss of traditional roles (particularly of the family) but that the possibility for trying on multiple personae as the situation requires can bring with it an "optimistic sense of enormous possibility" (pp.150, 178). These participants seemed to be ambivalent about the fractional nature of their relationships; N grieved lost friends

“almost like they died,” but M was torn about meeting an Everquest friend in his offline life. If fractional relationships are increasing in frequency, how will this affect our efforts to approach the ego-ideal? These participants found their online identifications meaningful and rewarding, particularly in that they were able to take on idealized aspects of themselves and others and be recognized as this new conglomeration of ideals. Will we begin to do the same in all our relationships? How will those relationships carried out exclusively online differ, or be the same? Will players be able to use the internet as Turkle (1997) hopes, to resolve conflicts from offline life, or will players’ successes online be limited to their fantasy world of choice, as Young (1996, 1997) fears? These questions will remain alive as the internet world is constantly in flux. As this study comes to a close, many Everquest players are moving on to other, newer online games. Everquest II is now up and running, and with it new ways of blurring the line between online and offline life; players could recently order pizza delivery through in-game commands (MIT Advertising Lab, 2005; Sony Station, 2005). Questions about the ways the internet in general and games like Everquest in particular affect our lives, online and off, clinically and personally, will remain open for some time.

Appendix 1: Everquest concepts and purpose of the game

Everquest players, in creating a character, choose from a limited number of fantasy races (such as elf, human, or troll) and classes (such as wizard, warrior, or cleric). Each class and race has its particular strengths and weaknesses, and each is associated with a certain storybook type of lore that is common to various role-playing games and fantasy books such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2004). For example, all the participants in this study chose rogue characters, which are usually imagined as mischevious, nimble, and secretive creatures. In terms of race, M chose the dark elf, which in fantasy lore are an evil but magical and mysterious group. Race and class may limit what a character can do in terms of game mechanics – for example, only warriors can wield certain types of weapons, and only rogues have the ability to sneak and hide from MOBs, and dark elves will be killed on sight by light elf guards, but nothing within the game requires players to enact their character’s chosen race and class in interactions with other players’ characters.

One of the goals of the game is to gain “experience,” which one gets by either killing MOBs or completing in-game quests. Quests typically involve speaking to a non-player character (NPC, a character controlled by the program rather than another player), who asks the player to travel to another place to kill a MOB or find an object and return for a reward. As characters gain more experience, they become more powerful within the game and gain access to new spells, abilities, and places in the Everquest world. In some cases, characters can gain new items such as weapons or armor by killing MOBs, as they can take, or “loot” (both a verb and a noun, referring to items looted, in game terms) items that the MOBs were carrying. When characters band together to kill a very

powerful MOB, each character in the group or raid shares in the experience gained, and usually decide amongst themselves how to share any available loot. Players form raids in the game to gain the experience and loot from MOB's that they could not kill by themselves. In this way, the game encourages cooperative action among players.

To play Everquest, players must log onto one of several "servers," or central computers that run the program of the game, store information about all the characters in that world, and coordinate the actions of all the characters that are currently logged on. Sony, the company who owns Everquest, charges a subscription fee to access the servers, and each server is running a separate game of Everquest. The servers are somewhat analogous to several groups of people playing Monopoly in different homes. If I choose to play Monopoly in my home, and my friend decides to play in a game across the street, we are both playing the same game, but never together. While Everquest has recently allowed chat to occur across servers (creating "server-wide" chat channels), characters on different servers will never see each other in game. Before creating a character in Everquest, players must choose the server on which they wish to play. Players may choose randomly, or may choose to join the same server as an offline friend who plays the game.

While most servers are running identical versions of the game, some servers have different rules than others. The most notable difference concerns PvP servers. In most servers, characters may not attack each other; they are, with very few exceptions, immune to each other's attempts at damage. The main focus is on fighting against elements of the program, MOB's, and this type of fighting is called PvE or player versus environment. In PvP, or player versus player servers, players still fight MOB's, but they are also free to

fight each other, and even to take loot from any character they kill. Aside from this rule change, the games are mostly identical across PvE and PvP servers.

Because the information of a character (such as the items, weapons, spells, and experience he or she has, and his or her location in the Everquest world) is stored on a particular server and attached to one's subscription account, characters have a sort of existence independent of the player who created them. Even if a player lets his or her subscription lapse, characters are stored on the server for an indeterminate length of time unless the player deliberately deletes the character from the server. Like a picture that has been uploaded to a photo-hosting website, the information about an Everquest character remains on the server even if the player completely deletes Everquest from his or her personal computer. This prevents players who accidentally let their subscriptions lapse from losing their characters, but it also makes it easy for a player who intended to quit the game to return and pick up where he or she left off. For this reason, players who have difficulty quitting might decide to delete their character – though one interview in this study illustrates how difficult it can be for a player to permanently delete a character into which he had invested much time and energy.

Since characters are stored on central servers rather than players' computers, the character belongs to anyone who knows the account name and password and pays the subscription fee. It is entirely possible to give over access to one's account. Some players have taken advantage of this fact to sell their characters to other players. Rather than spend the long hours required to gain experience and items to make one's character very powerful, a player might pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to buy someone else's high-level character. Similarly, it would be possible for characters to arrange the

sale of in-game items for real life cash. Both practices have long been forbidden by Sony's user licence agreement, but in the face of ongoing demand for the sale of these virtual goods, it has recently opened its own, sanctioned place for the auction of in-game goods and characters ("Station Exchange", n.d.; Terdiman, 2005). However, as one of the interviewees illustrates, players are often suspicious or critical of "ebayed" characters.

Appendix 2: Flowchart of contact with participants

Solicit volunteers

- by posting to Everquest-related message boards
- by inviting online acquaintances to participate
- by asking online acquaintances for referrals to people who play Everquest regularly

Contact volunteers

- by phone or email
- outline what will be involved in participating
- arrange a convenient time and place to meet
- ask participant to log a gameplay session before we meet
 - answer any questions

Meet with participants

- review and sign consent form
 - answer any questions
- conduct interview (this may span one or two meetings, at the option of the participant)
- provide contact information for me and answer any questions
- get contact information from participants in case follow-up is needed

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Drawn from Weiss (1994)

Study of Online Interactions through Everquest

1. *What is the aim of the study?* In this study, I hope to learn about online interactions through Everquest. What attracts people to Everquest, and how do they experience themselves and others online? The internet offers a new way for people to meet and interact, and Everquest's environment is particularly conducive to online interactions. I hope to learn more about the benefits and drawbacks of online interactions, how they are different from or similar to offline interactions for Everquest players.
2. *What is involved in participating?* We will meet for one or two interviews, depending on what seems most useful. Interviews will last between one and two hours, and will happen at a place that is convenient for you. Before the interview, I would like you to log one gameplay session – perhaps the last time you play before the interview. We can use this log during the interview as a specific example of what interacting in Everquest is like for you. I will be taping the interviews and will make transcriptions of the tapes.
3. *Who will have access to my log/the interview tape?* I will be the only one reading your log, listening to and transcribing the tapes.
4. *Are there any risks or benefits involved in participating?* The only risk I foresee is of breach of confidentiality. To prevent this, I will keep the logs, tapes, and transcripts in a secure location that only I have access to. In my transcripts and report, I will change all names (your name and the name of any of your characters) and any identifying information. Some people find that participating in an interview is beneficial in that it gives them a chance to talk about something that is important to them.
5. *What are my rights as a participant?* You may ask any questions you have about the study at any time, and I will answer fully. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation is voluntary.
6. *What will you do with the results?* This research is part of my doctoral dissertation work at Duquesne University. I will report the my findings in my dissertation, which will be presented to faculty at the University and preserved in the University library and in an online database. I would eventually like to publish my findings in a scholarly journal or book chapter.
7. *Who should I contact if I have more questions?* You may contact the researcher: Jennifer Bortle, Duquesne University, Psychology Department, Pittsburgh, PA 15282. I may be reached by phone at 617.783.2149 or via email at: jenn.bortle@gmail.com. You may also contact the research advisor, Dr. Russ Walsh, at the same address, phone number 412.396.6520 or walshr@duq.edu.

Jennifer Jamieson, M.A., researcher

Participant, date

Appendix 4: Interview guide

1. Interest in Everquest

- How were you introduced to Everquest? How did you become interested in it?
- How often do you usually play? How many times during the last week?
- Walk me through the day of your logged session – did you anticipate playing Everquest that day? What were you doing before you logged on? What was the first thing you did when you logged on? Then what? What were you thinking and feeling while you were playing?

2. Everquest characters

- Tell me about the character you played during the logged session. How long have you played this character? How did you create this character?
- Is this character (or any character you play) like you? How? How not? Do you feel you are role-playing, or simply being yourself when you play this character (or any other character you play)?

3. Experience of others

- Describe your interactions with other players during the logged session.
- Was there any time during the logged session in which you felt particularly personally involved? Describe? Any time that you felt particularly uninvolved personally?
- Do you interact with others differently in Everquest than you do online? Is there anything you can say or do interpersonally in Everquest that you tend not to do in face-to-face interactions? Example?

4. Online relationships

- Have you made any friends (or experienced any close relationship) in Everquest? Tell me about him/her. Tell me about the last time you encountered this person in Everquest. What did you talk about, what were you thinking/feeling?
- Do you ever interact with people you meet in Everquest in other contexts? Tell me about a time?
- Think of a friend you know outside of EQ – tell me about the last time you interacted with this person. What did you talk about, what were you thinking/feeling? How is your relationship to this person different from or similar to your EQ relationships?

Appendix 5: Initial reflection: my responses to interview questions

1. Interest in Everquest

- **How were you introduced to Everquest? How did you become interested in it?**

I was introduced to Everquest by a boyfriend. At the time, I already played computer games and had played some online games before, never role-playing games. I was uninterested at first, as my experience of online gaming had been that most people were rude, but he became so hooked to the game instantly that eventually I decided to give it a try. I enjoyed the game and found that people were much more cooperative and polite than in previous online games I had played. I really became interested in the game when I joined a guild and began to play regularly with friends I met online.

- **How often do you usually play? How many times during the last week?**

During the last week I played one time for about 2 hours. On an average week, I might play between 0-6 hours, 0-2 times per week.

- **Walk me through the day of your logged session – did you anticipate playing Everquest that day? What were you doing before you logged on? While you were playing? What were you thinking and feeling while you were playing?**

I had read on the guild message board that a group was forming that night, and as I was getting out of work early, I thought I might be able to join them. I was excited about seeing other people in the guild, because it had been a long time since I had played. I got home from work, did a few things around the house, then logged in to see if anyone was on. There were lots of people I knew playing, so I was excited to join them, and they greeted me warmly when I logged on. I chatted with a couple of people in the guild about things they had posted on the guild website as I traveled to meet them in game – I had read that one player was also taking up knitting, and we spoke in chat about that, and she agreed to send me a pattern she was currently working on via the website message boards. I joked and talked with other guild members as we played for about an hour, then most of us needed to log off to prepare for bed or do other things. I enjoyed talking with them and enjoyed playing the game as well.

2. Everquest characters

- **Tell me about the character you played during the logged session. How long have you played this character? How did you decide to create this character?**

Edilye, a high-elf wizard, is the first character I ever created in Everquest. Most of the people who know me online know me as “Edi.” I’ve played her for about 2 years. I chose to create a high-elf wizard because I had enjoyed reading about wizards in books when I was growing up. Wizards also seemed bookish to me, people who devote their lives to study, which I identified with. I wanted a character that reflected me.

- **Is this character (or any character you play) like you? How? How not? Do you feel you are role-playing, or simply being yourself when you play this character (or any other character you play)?**

I don’t feel that I do much role-playing with Edi, or any of my characters, really. I feel like I may come across differently because of the medium, though. Playing with people I

don't know well, or who do not chat or joke around much, I can be very quiet – silent in fact. With people I know better, or people who joke and talk a lot, I am more outspoken, much like I am with people I am comfortable with offline. Edilye is not like me, of course, in that she is a wizard, an elf, and is, in typical video game fashion, of Barbie-like proportions. All of this sometimes enters into Everquest chat, which then is role-playing. Still, when people call me “Edi” or say nice things about me online, I feel personally good, like they are talking about me.

3. Experience of others

- **Describe your interactions with other players during the logged session.**

Before going to meet my friends, I stopped to get buffs (beneficial spells) from another player who was offering them to everyone. This was a pretty anonymous interaction, and one that I am used to making mechanically. I give the player money, they give me buffs. Sometimes little things will make me notice a particular player offering buffs; for example, this person rejected my offer of money – she was giving buffs for free. Most do not do this. When I was chatting with my friends, the interactions felt much more personal. I was discussing knitting with another player who I had just learned knit, talking with several players about my recent engagement, which I had shared with them in the online message boards. There is an interesting kind of conflation of me and my character, so that they seemed to be talking both about me, the player, getting engaged as well as me, Edilye, getting engaged. Most of the people in my guild, though they know a bit about my life, do not know, or do not call me by, my real name. The same is true for most other characters in the guild – character names are used most often, even though they are usually fairly disclosive about their lives.

- **Was there any time during the logged session in which you felt particularly personally involved? Describe? Any time that you felt particularly uninvolved personally?**

I felt particularly happy at the welcoming response I got when I first logged on to the game, receiving chat messages greeting me, inviting me to come join them, and congratulating me on my engagement. It felt like walking into a room full of friends I had not seen in some time to find that they still remembered me and were happy to see me.

- **Do you interact with others differently in Everquest than you do online? Is there anything you can say or do interpersonally in Everquest that you tend not to do in face-to-face interactions?**

I can approach strangers more easily in the game than in real life; Everquest requires cooperation, and so approaching strangers for help or advice is expected and easy. I also experience others in Everquest as usually very willing to help or talk to someone they do not know. Perhaps part of the reason this feels easier is that it is also safer, more removed. I would be hesitant to approach people on the street in the offline world because it might not always be a safe thing to do. In Everquest, the worst that can happen is that a person would be rude, which is bothersome, but it is easy to find someone else to talk to or ask for help. Simple social interactions that do not require much personal investment are much easier to come by in Everquest than offline, it seems, though making friends with someone is more similar to the offline world; it takes time and effort to get to know someone.

4. Online relationships

- **Have you made any friends (or experienced any close relationship) in Everquest? Tell me about him/her. Tell me about the last time you encountered this person in Everquest.**

Yes! One of my closest friends in Everquest is Peleg. I met him early on, when I first began playing. Peleg's real name is Mike, though most often I call him Peleg and he calls me Edi. We got to know each other by playing together often and being in the same guild. He is kind and funny, and will happily sacrifice things like making experience and gaining levels in the game to do something fun with me, or to help me gain levels, as he is a much higher level than me and plays much more often. I particularly enjoy that Peleg is more interested in having fun with people he likes than advancing in the game. Once, when Peleg was considering quitting the game, he and I emailed, but it felt very different from our interactions in the game somehow. We never emailed very much, and Peleg eventually came back to Everquest. Now I will sometimes email him if I have not been able to play for some time, but trying to develop our friendship outside of Everquest felt awkward. Though we do not always talk about Everquest in Everquest, it felt like an important context had been removed when we just emailed.

The last time I talked to Peleg, I was not actually playing Everquest. My fiancé was playing and noticed Peleg was logged on. I asked to talk to him, and while still logged on as my fiancé's character, Peleg and I chatted for a few minutes about his job search, his family, and my internship interviews. We made vague plans to try to play together that weekend, but it did not work out.

- **Do you ever interact with people you meet in Everquest in other contexts?**

I met someone from Everquest for the first time this year. A couple in my new guild who live in Pittsburgh suggested we meet for dinner. I had been in the neighborhood of online friends before, but never suggested meeting for some reason. One of my good friends in Everquest used to live in my hometown, and I would sometimes mention as we chatted that I was visiting, but neither of us ever suggested we meet. Somehow, I think I wanted to preserve the image I had of him in my mind, without meeting the real person. However, meeting the couple who lives near me was enjoyable, and did not interfere with our friendship in Everquest. In fact, many of the members of my current guild have met before, and they even have a reunion yearly that many attend. Though I have not attended the reunion, I learned some personal information about many of them through the couple I met, and it is interesting to know. I feel like it fleshes out the image of them that I have through their characters, or in some cases provides an interesting contrast. I am not sure I would want to attend a reunion, however. I feel reluctant to involve myself more intimately in their lives. I have sometimes felt guilty for not playing Everquest more often, because I feel like I am letting friendships in the guild slide, just as if I did not call or visit an offline friend for some time. This is somewhat easier to do in Everquest, however; the friendships are almost entirely contingent on me playing the game. If I quit, I would likely never hear from any of them again.

- **How is your relationship to this person (or other Everquest relationships) different from or similar to your offline relationships?**

The boundedness of the friendship is different in the sense I mentioned above; the friendship is contained within the game, and so, when I do not have time to play, those

friendships are put on hold for the most part. Few of my Everquest friendships would continue, I think, if I stopped playing. Otherwise, I talk to my Everquest friends about many of the same things I talk to my offline friends about, though I only use identifying information about myself with online friends I know fairly well, not with people I am just meeting. Though many online researchers stress anonymity as attractive to people forming online relationships, and I am in many ways more anonymous when talking to new people online, I feel that I have the same sort of concern for my reputation (or Edilye's reputation?). I treat people very similarly to the way I would offline.

Appendix 6: Concerning game logs

Though I did quote at length from my interviews with players in my data presentation, I chose to summarize, rather than quote, the contents of the player's game logs. My decision was primarily driven by concern for brevity clarity; the game logs, unedited, were much longer than I expected, often well over a hundred pages for an hour of gameplay. Unedited, these logs also contained much information that was of little relevance to the characters' interactions with others. Below, for example, is an unedited section of D's game log:

[Sun Oct 24 18:24:05 2004] You pierce a murkglider deathgrime for 223 points of damage.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] Maximo scores a critical hit! (210)
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] You pierce a murkglider deathgrime for 210 points of damage.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] You pierce a murkglider deathgrime for 156 points of damage.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] a murkglider deathgrime has been slain by Jerusha!
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] You gained raid experience!
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:06 2004] a murkglider deathgrime's corpse lashes out with its tentacles as it slowly bleeds to death.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:10 2004] a murkglider deathgrime bobs on the air as it attacks.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:14 2004] Draconius tells the guild, 'all melee stay far back till 80&PCT; when he becomes unrooted'
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:16 2004] --Niszar has looted a Murkglider Claw.--
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:19 2004] The echo of the Trusik fades.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:20 2004] Ryna ceases protecting Shule.
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:21 2004] You tell your party, 'has IL killed this yet?'
 [Sun Oct 24 18:24:23 2004] --Niszar has looted a Murkglider Stomach.--

D was participating in a guild raid. In this situation, text is produced every time his character causes damage to the MOB, a spell is cast, a MOB is killed, or someone loots an item from a dead MOB, among other things. Of this selection, only two lines of the text are pieces of conversation between D and his fellow raiders: the line from a character, Draconius, giving instructions for fighting the MOB, and the line from D, who

asks members of his group whether another guild (IL) has successfully completed the same raid. This segment of text would be very difficult for someone who is not familiar with the game to interpret.

Even in segments of text that have been edited to eliminate text not produced by the characters themselves (i.e. only to include “speech” between characters), Everquest conversations can be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the game to follow. Below is an edited section of N’s log:

[Tue Oct 19 14:59:41 2004] cazic.Rendil tells serverwide.thering:5, 'where is Rusted Muramite Battle Crest from'

[Tue Oct 19 14:59:56 2004] venril.Fujiko tells serverwide.thering:5, 'Hi Lisa :)'

[Tue Oct 19 14:59:59 2004] kael.Hsishi tells serverwide.thering:5, 'don't know but it looks nice'

[Tue Oct 19 15:00:12 2004] You tell serverwide.thering:5, 'right back to the days of rusty stuff =)'

[Tue Oct 19 15:02:20 2004] Trades tells the guild, 'we putting something together?>'

[Tue Oct 19 15:02:36 2004] You say to your guild, 'i got the time if you got theum, everything else'

[Tue Oct 19 15:02:48 2004] Trades tells the guild, 'need MT'

[Tue Oct 19 15:02:58 2004] Trades tells the guild, 'and healer'

[Tue Oct 19 15:02:58 2004] You say to your guild, 'i'm a rogue, i can MT'

[Tue Oct 19 15:03:04 2004] You say to your guild, '(low greens)'

[Tue Oct 19 15:03:09 2004] Trades tells the guild, 'not in WoS'

[Tue Oct 19 15:05:22 2004] You say to your guild, 'while we're waiting, i need one or two level 65's, one preferably a cleric, to sit on their ass with me '

[Tue Oct 19 15:05:25 2004] cazic.Furty tells serverwide.rogue:2, 'lol lion skins going for 10k in my server.....cougar skins going for 50pp'

[Tue Oct 19 15:05:50 2004] You tell serverwide.thering:5, 'is Dirge a rogue-specific title?'

[Tue Oct 19 15:05:54 2004] cazic.Rendil tells serverwide.thering:5, 'no'

[Tue Oct 19 15:06:02 2004] You tell serverwide.thering:5, 'what are the criteria?'

[Tue Oct 19 15:06:06 2004] You tell serverwide.thering:5, 'like, ballpar =p'

[Tue Oct 19 15:06:54 2004] Nekronomicon tells wtrules:3, 'w3rd'

[Tue Oct 19 15:06:54 2004] maelin.Bummey tells serverwide.thering:5, 'A dirge is a funeral hymn'

[Tue Oct 19 15:06:58 2004] You say to your guild, 'Trades, wanna come sit on your ass with me?'

[Tue Oct 19 15:07:02 2004] You tell serverwide.thering:5, 'agreed'

[Tue Oct 19 15:07:03 2004] Senvon tells wtrules:3, 'w3rd'

[Tue Oct 19 15:07:05 2004] You tell wtrules:3, 'Yo'
 [Tue Oct 19 15:07:05 2004] Senvon tells wtrules:3, 'gimme lewts'
 [Tue Oct 19 15:07:06 2004] maelin.Bummey tells serverwide.thering:5, 'So it's more of a bard title, really'
 [Tue Oct 19 15:07:11 2004] Nekronomicon tells wtrules:3, 'hey kaz, whats up man?'
 [Tue Oct 19 15:07:14 2004] Trades tells the guild, 'heheh where?'
 [Tue Oct 19 15:07:16 2004] You tell wtrules:3, 'same old shit'

In this section, N is participating in several conversations, in different chat channels, at once. First, he talks with other rogue characters in a serverwide channel called “thering” about aspects of the game particular to rogues. Simultaneously, he talks with his guildmates about forming a group to fight MOBs and jokes about his being unsuited to be MT, or main tank, the primary hand-to-hand fighter for the group. Next, he talks in a playful way with other members of a special chat channel, “wtrules.” This segment also includes chat in various channels that is directed at no one in particular, who N could choose to respond to or not. Again, though this section may be clearer than the unedited log, it is still difficult to decipher for someone not very familiar with the game and the kind of language players use.

Summarizing the contents of these logs provides increased accessibility to the phenomena for readers, but at the cost of removing the interactions from the situated context in which they occur.

Appendix 7: N interview

So, we can start with what got you into the game.

Um, let's see, about five years ago, just before it actually came out, I was, yeah I wasn't in the beta or anything like that. But, a bunch of friends of mine online – I was involved in an online gaming community. So a lot of people – the buzz started going around, ohh – Everquest, Everquest. And, it came out in April, some of them bought it. And it took until Christmas before I got around to it, and yeah. I got into it.

So you bought it in April and then it sat...

No, I didn't get it – it came out in April, I got it for Christmas.

Oh. So, you were interested as soon as you heard about the game?

I'd been playing console RPGs for a while, and it made sense, you know, I like playing RPGs, I like playing with other people, let's play RPGs together.

It made sense.

Right.

So, can you tell me a little about your character that you play usually?

Well, I started out actually as a wizard on the Cazic server. And, that didn't go so well (laughs).

How so?

I played for about 9 months, and ended up making it to level 14. This was way back in the day when you know you didn't have all the xp bonuses and this hat and the other thing. So you had to claw for your xp. Yeah, so that went well until the next December, when everybody was like, come on, we're gonna move to this other server. This was when Vallon was fresh. This was just after they stopped it from coin and an item to just coin. And, so I went over there, and I started a rogue and I never looked back.

So, coin and an item versus just coin, you're talking about player versus player?

Yeah.

And you still play player versus player.

Yeah. When I do go on. The atmosphere has really changed on those servers with Planes of Power coming out you can get anywhere from anywhere. Camping becomes, well, fun if you've got the gear to do it. Not so fun if you're the one who has to scramble and find all the transportation.

So, how has that changed the attitude, like your attitude toward the game, or others'?

Well, if I played a class that was really good at PvP in the first place I'd say I'm getting kind of screwed here – this isn't as much fun. But, I see two roles as the PvP rogue. One, is you know, your PvE experience, when you go out, on a raid or whatever. And in PvP, if it's mass PvP I stay in the shadows and pop out, I stab someone and I sneak back. If it's solo, I run. There's no other way, you just run.

Uh huh.

Those are some of the best stories I have about my experiences in Everquest

Running?

Yeah. It's very in-character – the escape.

Hm. So, maybe this is about running, but what do you like about the game? What keeps you playing for 5 years?

Well, sometimes you see it as a bad relationship – you don't know why you're still in it, but something keeps drawing you back! But I do enjoy the game. Sometimes it's hard to find things to do. Honestly I think it's tradeskills that really bring me back every now and again. Like, oh this looks tough, there's nobody to group with – why don't I go bake?

Um hm. So, can you expand on the bad relationship metaphor? How so?

It's an intangible. You don't know why you're still with it. There's just something about the game. You know, the person to extend the metaphor – you just don't wanna let go. Probably there are memories to when there was a golden time. I remember the good old days of EQ.

What were they?

Boats.

And what was so good about boats?

Nothing.

(laugh) so what makes them the good old days?

It was, it was a group atmosphere I guess. There was a sense of camaraderie with people that you needed to sit there, wait for the boat, you know, by the time boats finally came out, it was like, 40 minute boat ride from anywhere to Kunark, and you were sitting there. And one person is like, I've gotta go AFK, watch my back. Cause, you got all the PvPers everywhere else. That's when that area of the world was still kinda hopping.

So it sounds like...

Exploring with people

...when boats were around, people needed each other more.

And even when Luclin came out, you had the spires, you're still waiting. And it's not so much you needed people, which you did, but you wanted people around. Tells can only get you so far.

How do you mean? What's the difference between talking to someone in tells versus actually being all together?

I don't know, it just is. You can be on the other side of the world and use tells and that's fun, but you can't go terrorize a little village of green mobs over tells. It just happens.

Things that you can actually do.

Yeah.

But in another sense, they are the same sort of – you're still interacting with people who are very far away.

Yeah.

But it matters that...

...that you can see the representation of the other person. That you can hang out with the representation of the other person.

Yeah? How about the representation of your character – important?

Kinda. Are we talking the appearance?

Yeah

Um, it's become a little easier to get an appearance over the years with the new models and everything. And the dark elf, I'm a rogue, hewn [armor] doesn't look all that well on dark elves. Personally, I mean, it's gotten better over the years, but he still looks so homeless. You have your patchwork, and then wow, I've got my first suit of banded, and it looks awful on so many different levels – it's brown over here and it's red on your legs.

And your hat if you had a hat was awful. This is back in the fledgling days when you were lucky to have one.

There's sort of a self-consciousness about...

A little bit

...the ugly armor. It matters what you're wearing...

it does.

...when other people are sitting there, seeing you.

It matters, but you can get around it. The new models, with the new dye system, anybody with a couple bucks in their pocket can look any way they want. You know, that kinda takes away from it.

Hm. It's also a matter of pride.

I earned the armor that eventually did look right all together.

It's interesting for something that – a minute ago you were talking about intangibles with the bad relationship...

..and that's a very tangible thing.

Yeah, there are those tangibles.

Nowadays, I like how my rogue looks now. With the new models, you can fix the hair and everything. He's bald. He's got a little goatee.

Nice.

And with the new title system he's very much become a swashbuckler.

How so?

Um, the title is swashbuckler. That's the way I've always kind of played my character. Very irreverent. Sort of folk.

So, can you say more about playing your character? Like how much, when you're on EQ, are you yourself, are you role-playing, what are you doing?

The first, I'd say, year or so, the first year on the new server I fell into sorts with a bunch of role-players, you know, we were in a role-playing guild. That was really the good old days, really put a face on that. You know, Kunark was new. I met these people, they were out in Lavastorm, cause we were all the dark folk, back when being dark was cool. Cause it's not anymore.

No?

It was team PvP, and it used to be the darkies versus everyone else. Which was fun for a while, but then PvE got so hard that you'd need a bard and things just kind of broke down. But back in the day it was cool to be dark, pure dark, and I met all these people and we hung out a bit, for like a couple of weeks. I remember running in and out of [place in the game] and getting our asses whipped from something that got pulled from one of the goblin camps. And we're like, you know what? Kunark's new, let's go over there, and we hung out in the Field of Bone for a while, moved up to Kurn's Tower. Just that progression that you can really remember everything that you went through. The people that you were there with. And yeah, it was role-playing for a while. And I ended up having an online marriage.

Oh, wow!

We didn't get a GM involved, but we had enough friends, that we had the jeweler. I was actually the jeweler. I made the rings. I made the alcohol. Friend of mine made the food. Another friend of ours made a set of black armor that we could wear just to look nice. And it was...

So how did that happen in the course of the role-play?

I don't know. It was just me and this other person, she lives in Toronto. We've since become good friends. we've kind of dropped the role-play aspect. And we're just friends now. But uh, we just hung out so much, and that was the first thing either of us would do when we got on. Is he on? Is she on? Let's go kill something. And before long it was, is he on? Is she on? Let's go tradeskill. Let's go hang out. Let's go just chat. You know, it didn't matter if you were doing anything. That could've been in tells. Doesn't necessarily have to be in group. And things just moved along.

And at the time, did you know the player behind the character?

No. this is strictly in-game.

And you would never talk about your life outside.

Oh yeah, we did. I mean, not in any great depth, but you know, here and there. Not so much problem sharing, but you know, good things that go on. And venting, oh I hate my job, etc. chill out, let's go kill a goblin.

And how did marriage come up?

I don't know, it just did. Another person in another guild was talking about it, and we were all getting together, and they're like, a friend of mine of a friend of a friend said they got a GM to do the service, it was kinda cool. And then I happened to go to one. I was playing my wizard for some reason on the Cazic server, because I just bring myself to delete him. And I went on for a smidge of nostalgia and they were having one in Crushbone. You know, they have a royal guard of sorts sitting there, keeping all the mobs clear. And they were in there just having a grand old time. Somebody was summoning all kinds of alcohol, and sitting there running, pick it up, drink it, run into walls. Very low alcohol tolerance, of course. And I said you know what? This could be kinda fun. And it all fell into place from there.

So, what was that like for you as a player, having your character get married? If you were going to explain to somebody who didn't know anything about what the game was about?

I probably wouldn't. because it's a difficult thing to explain to someone who doesn't play. Even for somebody who's new to the game, because it's such a different game from what it was back when the game first started. There is no role-play aspect anymore. It's totally gone. Do you play regularly anymore?

No, actually. The whole school thing also gets in the way for me.

Yeah.

So, you're not speaking to someone who doesn't know anything about the game.

Yeah. Things have changed. Even in the past couple of months. Omens of War came out. I haven't been keeping up. I logged on the other day they're like "come to Wall of Slaughter." I'm like, where the hell is that?

It sounds like you're not happy with the way the game has gone.

Not so much – well yeah. Yeah. I'm not happy with the way it's gone and that's only compounded by the fact that I haven't been in it to go with it. And I, I can adapt, I can change. I've been doing a pretty good job of it thus far, but, I haven't been. So it's gotten kind of out of my hands.

Even though you're not crazy about the way it's going, you still would like to be there.

Yeah. Lost Dungeons of Norrath, that came out and that was like a real call back to the good days. You know you get together with a couple of people, you do something. It's kind of an intense atmosphere. It brings you back to the days, waiting for the boat, you know, watch my back. Everybody's gotta be constantly watching for everyone else.

So what happened to your role-play guild and your EQ wife?

It deteriorated. I mean, nothing bad really happened, it just kind of faded before long and became more and more out of character and then in character was the break from the norm. She started coming online less and less. She's since re-emerged and we're actually in the same guild again. But, it was a slow fade.

You mean between just the two of you or the guild itself?

The guild as a whole. Once that broke down she started playing less.

So, I wonder about now, how much do you know about the people you play with.

You said you've been learning more about her offline life?

About everybody I play with probably not a lot. There are a select few. There's this other rogue that I've known since just after that role-play guild fell apart. We've been close ever since. And uh, the past couple of months since I've not been online I put my AIM screen name on the message board, he is also in my guild now. It's funny how they all came together, all the people I've ever known from all the other pure dark guilds have just kinda congregated here. But yeah, I threw out my screen name he and I hooked up and that's pretty cool. And a couple of other people, I know some things about other people – outside the box, if you will.

Do you find that, how's your relationship with them, like, now that you and this guy are talking on AIM, is it different from talking to anybody else that you know, outside the realm of Everquest?

I'd say it's almost better. I'd put them on the level of an acquaintance from school. Some of them I wouldn't really go out of my way to hang with but yeah, I'll talk to them online. But then there's the added bonus of knowing Everquest. It's a common tie, I suppose.

I wonder, do you find that eventually it seems that you drop out of roleplaying as well and were doing more of talking about everyday life. Did you find then that you were interacting in the same way you would face to face, or were there still things that you could do or things that you could say in EQ that you wouldn't with somebody else?

No, not really. Um, I'm probably a little more open on Everquest. There is no real personal aspect unless you give it one. Unless you put yourself out there. I'd say I'm probably a little more outspoken in game.

Can you think of an example, a time when you said something you wouldn't ordinarily?

No, not really. Just kinda, kinda melts together after a while.

What about, what went into the making of either of your characters, when you were first coming up with these guys. How did you decide, a wizard the first time?

That was what I had been playing. What it was, this community of role-players, it wasn't so much a community of role-players, which it was, but we had like an online RPG by then. Like, there was this kid, he lived in North Carolina, and he'd sit there week after week. I don't know if he had a dice program or a fist full of dice, but we'd play what was

essentially D&D over the internet. And it was a lot of fun. You got to add a lot of flair to your characters that I guess is the real role-playing aspect. And I was a wizard, um more out of the style of Final Fantasy Five-ish kind of wizard, you know. Very focused, you're a wizard, that's that. We'd have weekly chats, and there'd be like trivia about games in general, and you could earn yourself a couple of extra bucks on the side and get yourself all kinds of items that you could use in our battles. It was a very story-oriented kind of thing. So I was the wizard. And then I got into Everquest, I thought, you know what? Go with what you know. And I was. I made what was possibly the worst wizard imaginable. Nobody knew anything about stats back then. I think I threw 10 points into strength. Another 5 into dexterity. I thought, what am I gonna do with spells, why don't I get myself a good knife and I can shoot people away and cast a spell now and again. I've since made another wizard on Vallon. I did most of the right things. It's a very different – they're two very different things. With a little bit of experience you know what to do and what not to do.

Did you carry the same role-playing character from your original wizard into Everquest? Yup. It tends to be ah, a little bit – it had gotten to the point where we weren't really role playing the characters that we were, but the characters that we all knew, like from the old community. Everybody knew who everybody was. They didn't necessarily have the same names, but we all knew, that's him, that's her, that's him. And we just went about our usual weekly chat sort of business only all the time.

So it was an old character, in a way

Yeah

That you were bringing in...

It was new in the sense that, spiders were still kicking it to death, but we all knew each other as an old soul I suppose.

How did you come up with the wizard the first time, for the RPG board?

Um, my favorite RPG at the time was [name of game] – have you ever played? [I nod no] it's a kind of strategy I suppose – you move your guys around on the board, and you know, it's class based. There was this wizard, and then, I suppose the rest is history.

What did you like about him, as far as personality?

They didn't really have much personality. This game was about '92 or so, back when it was mostly about gameplay. Storyline was cool, but, you know, it was a good game to play. And the personalities weren't all that special. Not like nowadays, Final Fantasy 10, 10-2, the upcoming 12, which I'm drooling about (laughs).

School won't stop you from playing that?

No. probably. But I'll get it on a break. Yeah I don't know what drew me, it just did. And then I ended up drawing up you know, my own kind of a personality. I drew up a little bit of fiction as a history, and it just fell into place I guess. There was no real personality about it, so, pick your own.

I guess I'm wondering with either of your characters, how much of their character is like you, or are they very different?

Mostly.

Mostly?

They're very loose with their words, I suppose. I shoot my mouth off a bit here and there. (laughs) um, and they're very sarcastic kinds of characters, kind of people. You

know, people like me. And, yeah, a lot of my character is a lot of me. And sure there are differences.

Any come to mind?

I don't have nearly as many knives as my rogue is wielding. (laughs) I do have a collection that I've amassed over the years. I'd probably say Everquest spurred me on to that. Rather than having them made me decide to make me into a rogue.

I wonder, are there any other ways – it sort of developed your interest in knives – other ways that Everquest has affected the rest of your life? Outside of the game itself?

mmm... I don't know. I guess the whole tradeskill aspect. It hasn't made me want to go out and make poison, to bake, to brew, but it certainly piqued an interest.

Hm? In any of those in particular, or just the idea?

Just the idea of you know, I like to make things. I like the idea of creating things. I don't, but I could, maybe.

Yeah, you too could be a baker.

I do. I enjoy cooking. I'm not that good at it, I don't do it very often, having only a microwave and a measuring cup at my disposal at the moment.

That's limiting.

It is, but it's the idea of such.

What about, I remember you mentioned a girlfriend last week, the one who wanted to spend Thursday with you – what's her attitude toward the game? Does she play?

No, she doesn't. she doesn't have much of an attitude towards the game because she doesn't like the idea of it. She doesn't like the idea of me playing, I don't know if she doesn't like the idea of me playing with other people, or she doesn't like the idea of her playing with other people and she's like, "that's weird, why do you do it?" it's just gotten to the point where I don't talk to her about it. It's not worth the hassle on either of our parts.

Since you're playing with other people, do you guys role-play together in other formats?

No. not anymore. It's just Everquest. And it's not even roleplaying anymore. She just doesn't like – she's not very extroverted. She doesn't like a lot of people, knowing a lot of people at once, I suppose. And she thinks that's really weird.

So when you're on EQ you're actually being around a lot of people

You could say, it's interacting with a lot of people.

How did you manage that, when you were still playing more regularly?

Um, we live a good distance away, so we're not together 24-7. And uh, with the advantage of programs coming out like EQ windows where you can actually tab in and out, so one window is EQ and the other is AIM and I'm still keeping up with her.

So you can be talking with her at the same time you're playing a game.

(dramatically) She's just another tell!

(laugh) are you quoting that?

No, no. that would've been kind of, that would be one of the worst things ever if they could integrate AIM or MSN or Yahoo into tells. Like they do server-wide.

Why would it?

Because the probability of a mis-tell is terrible. Then you have to explain it. It doesn't matter if you're talking about killing a dragon, or other more risqué topics, you're still going to have to explain something, here and there, and it's just not worth the hassle.

I can see the room for trouble there. Is that hard to do, to play the game while you're talking with her?

It probably used to be. But, back in the day – again, I keep using that phrase.

That's fine

Way back when!

Back when Everquest was good...

Yes! Back when we were roleplaying and everything, it probably would've been hard going back and forth, but A. the technology didn't exist, and B. neither did my girlfriend. So as we've become more advanced and we can just tab in and out, we're just people playing games now and we know that, and it's not so hard. We can just switch over and talk.

I wonder about – it seems like even though a lot of your characters are similar to yourself, you're describing a different mindset when you're in EQ, even if you're not roleplaying, than when you're outside of it.

It's more goal-oriented conversation I suppose, about doing things, even if you're not actually moving.

And does goal oriented always mean killing goblins?

Not necessarily.

You're thinking of boat conversations?

Yeah, conversations, I used to like to just run. Now that the advent of all kinds of transportation, it's nice every now and again to just start at Freeport and race someone to Queynos. It's a slow process, but it's a good way to waste an hour or two. If you're going to be sitting there chatting, why not? Make a run of it.

Interesting use of the idea of being goal oriented – using an hour to run from one side of the world to another...(pause)...let me think, well, I wonder how you think about yourself online? You say you're a little more free with your words. How would I be seeing you differently if I were meeting you through Everquest, or how do you think others see you through EQ who don't know you?

Um, I'm probably much more prone to meeting people, to actually putting myself out there and meeting new people in game than I am in real life. Like I like having friends in real life, I like knowing people, I don't that first step of actually having to get to them. But it doesn't seem to be a hurdle in game.

How do you do it in game?

Then it's just as easy as an LFG tag away. Go, meet someone, look for a group, you find someone. Once you click, you click. If not, there's always another group. Usually. Maybe. That's kind of declined in the past months, it's become much more of a guild oriented game. You really need to, I don't know how it is on other servers, but on Vallon you need a guild to survive. If you don't have the friends and if you don't have the gear, you're dead in the water.

So, if I'm understanding you right, about meeting people in game, the LFG tag, if we had that in real life it would say "I'm open to someone coming to talk to me."

And interested in the following things...you know, and when you put up an LFG tag you know you're going to be doing something. Actually we don't use the LFG tag very

much, that's just a metaphor. We don't use it that much on Vallon because it kind of gives you away. And that's generally not something that you want done. You'll just sit in Plane of Knowledge and you'll shout, "looking for an adventure." Or "I need two or three people to go somewhere and do whatever."

Okay. Something about the goal oriented-ness.

Exactly. You don't – there's no mystery about it. You know what people are gonna come to you for.

I see. Hm, whereas approaching people, like, here.

Yeah, I wouldn't walk over to a table over there and be like "so, what are you reading? Wanna talk about it?"

But there is the same sort of chance there is with the LFG tag, isn't it? Because you could say, like, "oh, I don't feel like grouping, or doing whatever it is you wanna do."

But we don't ask people. Generally I don't ask people, you know, "would you like to group? Can I join you?" I mean, I don't know if other people do that, but generally speaking, I put out a shout, people respond.

I see. And that's not so socially accepted here – "who wants to talk to me?"

Yeah, get on the loudspeaker, "hey, I'm in the café!"

Alright, let me look at my cheat sheet...how often did you play back when you used to play regularly?

Ah, it varied. A couple of years ago, my first year in college, which probably contributed to low marks, I played almost nightly. I was on a floor where all my friends were, and the most we tended to do was sit around watch movies and eat pizza. And that all took place on the TV, so I'm over here watching the movie and playing the game.

Oh, at the same time. How long would you play in one sitting?

Uh, two or three hours on the weeknights. I can remember going from like 11 to 7 in the morning some Saturdays – Friday, Saturday nights.

So was it usually that kind of social thing that you're describing, like everybody's getting together, watching a movie, and while they do, you're also playing Everquest.

Dual socialness.

Yeah, twice the number of people you're being exposed to.

But then that ended, and I was actually living at home next year. Due to probably Everquest, among other things.

How so?

I didn't do so well my freshman year in college. Here I am, technically I suppose my junior year. My credits are a little flipped out right now. Yeah, so I was at home for a year. I went to Bunker Hill for a semester and I worked for the other semester.

So your grades were not so great, that – did you flunk out?

No, suspension. They weren't abysmal, but they weren't up to [college]'s lofty standards.

And then you came back. How do you manage that now, knowing that Everquest is part of what got you into trouble earlier?

I haven't played.

Was that a conscious decision?

Not really. I'm more active with other people. I guess everything that I do is pretty much on a computer now. Now people come in, "hey, let's watch something," it's the DVD player on the computer. So, there is no more.

So you can't do them both at once.

Yeah. But it was a bit of a conscious decision. And a bit not, it just went on the side. I played since I've been in college this year, I've probably played three times.

Oh wow.

Yeah, not much more than an hour at any given point.

How was that to cut down so much? Do you miss it, think about it?

I do. I do miss it, but it's not, it doesn't have that big a hold on me that I need to play it. But I do miss it.

What do you miss about playing?

I just miss getting in – I miss playing the rogue. It's a fun class to play. Not so much to role-play – get into a group. It's not really intensive as a combat participant. Every now and again the tank dies and you need to pick up the slack. Which is horrible. I can do it for at least 15 seconds. Pop "nimble," then that's gone, then you start running in circles. But, yeah, you've got a few tricks up your sleeve. And then, when everything falls apart, escape. The button, not my personal escaping skills, which I promise you are excellent! (laughs)

I see. Well, what is fun about playing the rogue? You mentioned the running. It doesn't sound so much like covering for a tank is very fun.

It happens and you have to do it sometimes, but I can really tell you running, that is the most fun. Certainly the most entertaining thing I do as a rogue. Because there's not much else to do.

Well, let's talk more about running! Are you running to, running from...

Oh I'm running from.

And it's fun, to run from?

It's more fun than standing there and going, "you know what, I'm going to die. Send me back right now." It gives me a bit of a fighting chance. And I don't always get away, but, it happens.

So the fun thing is seeing if you can escape?

Yes. Yes.

If you can use your personal escaping skills.

The second day Lost Dungeons came out – were you playing around Lost Dungeons?

Yup.

You know, you've got the camps that send you one to the other to the other, and so on. There was this monk, Time-gear, and I'm not even close to EP. I've got a couple of pieces of ornate, everything else is my own personal collection. Mostly bizarre gear at this point. So I'm in a camp and this monk shows up, we're on opposite teams, and he's on the guild's top server – server's top guild rather. And there's a bit of a gear disparity, not to mention skill. You've gotta be the best of the best to get into this. And he starts to beat on me and I'm like, "woah, that's a monk? I've never seen a monk do 400 damage, welcome to the Plane of Time." So I'm off like a shot. I run out a ways, circle back, get back into the camp, talk to the Magus, you know, one second I'm in Butcherblock, the next I'm in South Ro. And he follows. And then I'm in Everfrost and he follows. And I bounce between maybe ten camps before coming back to Butcherblock. And tanking my

way from the camp, through the zoneline, to the book at Felwithe. And he's absolutely pissed. He starts sending me tells once I make it back to Plane of Knowledge, once my escape has been successful, and he's like "what the hell are you doing? Come back out here! I'm gonna kill you." I'm like no, you're not (laughing) I just made the way, that's my personal victory for the night.

Well, that does sound like fun.

It is. I've made it away from a couple of bards in my time. That has to be you know, the most of a personal accomplishment. If you've ever tried to duel a bard, it doesn't work very well, as any class, let alone being a rogue. But when you can shake a mez, and then bolt and they're like "oh, my mez doesn't break all that often, I'm gonna have to snare them." And I'll resist a snare or two, and you know, they start to panic. And then they start using the dots, hoping they can rip me down before I make it to the book. Which is hit or miss.

Wow, it's like a chase game.

It is. My resists aren't all that good either, so when I resist, I'm shocked.

It sounds really personally engaging, too. You sound proud of it, when you talk about the accomplishment of shaking this monk.

Like I said, as a PvP rogue, there really isn't much else I can do. I can hop up behind him, put on duelist, or one of the new assassin strike disciplines, you know, pop a backstab. If they're not on the ground, or under ten that I can start wailing on them and kill them, it's pretty much time to run. So it becomes almost a Tom and Jerry kind of thing. You know, you run in, you provoke the cat, and start going. Unless you can absolutely positively take him down with a frying pan.

So this is what you were going for when you made this character, yeah?

Probably not at first, but, pretty quickly I came into it. You realize after not long of playing that there's not much else you can do. If you're with a group, then you're added damage. Somebody else has all the attention, and you're sitting there pounding them in the back, unless they have a damage shield, at which point you might as well lie on the ground.

Which do you, do you like grouping better than being Tom or Jerry?

I can't – there's really not much I can do solo. I don't go out looking for trouble. This one time I popped into the Overthere. There was this wizard. He had a baron title, and he's just sitting on the ground, and I guess he's watching other PvP. So I said to myself, you know, why not? I'm close to the book, let me give it shot. Pop duelist, he's bleeding, he's gone. That's it. I think I popped him for 1300 and 1100. so, yeah. And that shocked the shit out of people. Like, if somebody came up and one-shotted me with Manaburn, not that you can do that anymore, with the 70% rule now, or 40% rule I think they changed it. But yeah, I'd be like, "what just happened?" but I don't have that rule in effect. Melee is melee, which is pretty cool. But uh, yeah, generally speaking I don't look for trouble. It finds me.

Have you ever met any of the people you've known in EQ in real life, or do you play with people that you know?

I don't play with people I know. I went to a Fan Faire. Two summers ago.

What was that like?

It was a blast! The first two hours you're doing a live quest. Have you been to a Fan Faire?

[shaking head no]

if you have the opportunity I would really suggest it, even if you don't play that much anymore, just to be with people that, you know, know the game and it's a lot of fun. Like they did this live quest, they had all these Sony employees lined up, you know, all over the place, down the plaza. And you'd go to one and you'd be like, "Hail." And they'd be like "I have this quest for you." I'm like "sure, why not, this is what we're doing, isn't it?" you know, you have to run to the other side, hail another 'NPC' and they'd give you something, bring it back, you know, fetch quests. We had this guy that was in our, you know, we had to group up. And this guy that was in our group, he was a ranger. You could tell he was a ranger because he had this really earthy looking vest on and a rather large bow.

Also a Sony employee?

No.

Oh?

This was a Fan Faire guy.

Okay.

So, he had, he was like "oh, I'll track shit down." So he came back 10 minutes later, we were on a fetch quest for a baking person. He ran to the Ben & Jerry's – god knows where it is – and he comes back with a little cup of chocolate syrup, and a cup of walnuts. I don't know where he went to get this stuff, I can't even thing of, where is there a Ben & Jerry's in relativity? To the Plaza? But you know, he came back. I don't think we ended up finishing that one, we were missing butter or something, and no one really wanted to go out and get it. But, yeah that was a lot of fun. And then the night didn't end so well. We were, we had gone through all the forums. I went to the tradeskill forum, which was great. Well, it wasn't really great. It was more of them telling you, you know, you're really pretty much screwed. They really haven't had much love for the tradeskillers. Except for the new interface. Have you played with it?

[nodding no]

so great. So great. Oh yeah, so after all the forums were done, they lined up on the balcony above, and we're down in wherever we are, and they're throwing T-shirts down. I jump, I twisted my ankle so bad coming down. (laugh) it wasn't the first time, I twist my ankle a lot, but that was bad. And I'm a big guy, so to have all that weight coming down, it was like...yeah. It's still in one piece, so I'm alright.

And did you get the shirt?

I did. I did get the shirt. And I fell to the ground and probably called for a cleric. Because it seemed the prudent thing to do. (laughing)

So when you were there, you were meeting other players?

From my server there were I think five people that showed up. Myself and my brother were two of them. And, no there were five people other than us. Two were from an allied guild, three were from a guild that you know, we couldn't have anything to do with. I think this was just on the tail end of the pure dark movement. Which was slowly moving into a decline.

So what was it like meeting these people?

It was kinda weird, but you get into it. Two of them were from really French parts of Canada. They didn't say much. One of them was just a regular guy – another, just a regular guy, and this other guy, he's actually from Woburn. And he plays a necro in the

allied guild. And it was kinda weird to meet someone that you know in game, but it was even more weird to meet someone you know in game and know that, you know, they live down the street.

Huh. How is it weird?

I don't know, it's just one of those things like, wow, you know, people play, you know, I'm near these people.

People like me?

Yeah, well, probably not like me. He was in his 30s. and he bore more than a passing resemblance to Mario.

As in...

Mario and Luigi. Yes.

Oh. (laugh) That reminds me – not like you, in his 30s – how old are you?

I'm uh, I'm 20. I had to think about that (laugh) I was 18 at the time.

People unlike you play.

Oh, all kinds of people play. And you see that going in there. They have the big get-together the first night, and you can see all kinds of people play. Old, young, male, female, whatever.

Uh huh. Was that surprising?

A little bit, until I went I didn't really think about people that played the game...

(interruption by girlfriend)

let me think then, what else have I not asked you about...I guess meeting new people on your guild, or on your server, have you kept in touch with any of them?

They've all stopped playing. Very often I'll get together with the friends that I do have now, not the ones that I've met, and just go, "where has everybody gone?" so many people have just dropped off the face of the fictitious planet that we inhabit.

Oh, when you say get together with the friends you have now you mean...

In game. In game.

And, does your brother still play?

Not very much. He still has an active account. He'll play once in a very great while, but he doesn't play on my server anymore. He has people that he knows from school that play. And I think they get together on – oh I don't even know.

So you guys never played together very much?

We did here and there. But not very much at all.

Well, unless there is anything else you can think of that I haven't asked you, that you think might be important to know, we can stop.

Um, well I played a cleric for a while, if that will help any (laughs). It's a very different mentality from playing a rogue I guess.

How so?

Um, it wasn't mine. I uh, was friendly with this cleric on my guild, and actually got to know each other. We met each other once, like out in Boston, she was living in Vermont at the time, and she came down and we met. That was pretty cool. Yeah, you can exchange account information which is always risky, but, uh, nothing bad has come of it. And yeah, I played her cleric quite a bit. In a late night, trying to look for a group, a cleric is much more desirable than a rogue. But it was fun. It was a different atmosphere, but it was fun.

How so?

Um, you really need to watch everybody's backs, and their fronts and their sides. You need to keep everybody in one piece. Rather than the rogue mentality of, you know, this is getting kind of hairy, I'd better get out.

Which do you prefer?

I prefer playing the rogue, but I really wouldn't mind having the cleric under my belt, just for a change. It's always nice to have a pocket rez. Always always nice. And she's since sold the character – stopped playing. Just like everybody else I know (laughs). It seems to be a very lonely server nowadays.

Yeah, I get this sense of desertion, or you've been abandoned by everybody you ever knew.

You meet your new people, but, you still pine for the old days, and very few people are around.

And once they stop playing, you never hear from them again.

Pretty much.

I get the sense that it's a real loss.

It kinda is. You remember just doing things with these people. And they're just not around anymore. It's almost like they died. You have no contact with them anymore, you'd never know. That they were alive.

Different from a friend, face to face, who sort of passes out of your life and you never see anymore.

Kinda similar, but there's always ways to track people down that you knew from school, that fell away. You can always find them again. I don't know where to start looking for, you know, Bob from the Cazic server. He could be anyone, anywhere.

Right. Makes sense.

Actually there was a thread on that – I saw it on some message board – one of the Vallon message boards. It was actually a thread about old-school people that made a lot of trouble. You read the thread and you're like wow, I remember him whipping me. I remember running with this guy. And it was a nostalgia trip.

Oh, that reminds me of something I haven't asked you about. You sent me a log, and thank you, and I didn't print it out because it was 103 pages long. I figured that was probably not a good thing to ask people to do, because I can't bring 103 pages and go through it. But, in general, what was going on – do you remember, when you were playing?

Um, I think I spent half of that time – I think it was actually a two hour log. Was it, I think it was about an hour and a half or so, because I realized once an hour had passed I hadn't given you anything, that was all looking for a group (laughs). But I finally got into a group, and the group didn't fare all that well, we hunted for maybe 20 minutes, and then the tank died, the shaman died, I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off, I finally shook the mob, and then I found this huge, whatever it was, you know, out in the new uncharted lands of omens of war. And I'm like, alright, I hit escape, I'm sneaking, I'm hidden, stealth and shadow, whatever, I'm out there and it sees me. I don't realize it sees me until I'm right on top of it (laughs). So, this thing gores me, throws me up in the air with some sort of gravity flux spell, and I'm a blood stain. And then I had to find my body, which I didn't do. Eventually someone else – no I think I found it. And then brought it back for a rez and I logged. And that was about it.

I noticed you join a lot of chat channels – a lot! What are they all like?

The first one is people that still play that have moved on to other servers. That was one of the bigger guilds, not so much a big guild, but one of the important dark guilds that we were in. everybody went their separate ways, but we still kind of talk. They're mostly on [server] now, which is no fun. The second one is the serverwide rogue channel. The third and fourth don't really have anyone in them. It's same deals with old guilds. And the fifth one is the ring.

What's that?

On the Safehouse. The serverwide chat. I only really talk in serverwide and the ring. Not in the one with the guild people who have moved on?

Not a lot of people in there. Sometimes there are, but they don't talk much, I don't talk much. There's a lot of conversation going on in serverwide and the ring. So it's easy to jump right in, you know, throw in your two cents and not really have to get dragged into a conversation.

I see, which is preferable?

Not always, but it's nice just pitch your words in here and there.

Do you ever get dragged into conversations you don't want to have?

Not usually. "sorry I went linkdead! We'll talk later I guess." There's always always always linkdead.

There's always a way out.

And when you're talking over chat channels or inter-server tells, they don't always get through, due to zoning.

I see.

I'm a rogue – I'm sneaky like that.

Sneaky, even in chat.

(laughs)

well, I don't want to keep you. Thank you so much!

Are you done? I don't want to cut you short.

No, I think we've covered a pretty good bit, unless you can think of something I haven't asked?

Seems about right. I do need to get to work at some point (laughs).

Appendix 8: M interview

I guess we can start with some basic stuff about you – do you mind telling me how old you are?

Certainly, I'm 32 years old.

And what do you do for a living?

I work for a company a company called C_ that is based out of B_. we're a company that sells custom software to hospitals, hospice, basically a lot of stuff dealing with home care.

Alright. And how did you get started with Everquest?

Well, to be honest a real life friend of mine who, you know I've known for many many years, basically said, "this is the new game coming out, uh – I really like it, I've had a lot of fun with it, why don't you give it a try?" and what happened was I went over to his place one night and spent about an hour or so making a character, and I really enjoyed it. I had a lot of fun with it, and uh, pretty much took off from there. (laughs)

Is that the character that you still play?

Yes.

The very first one?

Yeah, I'm actually kind of a rarity among everquest players because I don't have more than just the one character.

Oh, no alts?

I literally have the single character, no alts at all.

So, that is rare - what went into the character – what is the character's name?

A__.

What went into making A__?

Um well, to be honest I love reading R.A. Salvatore's works. He did the whole Crystal Shard, this character X_, was a dark elf and really was a neat character. I said "boy, wouldn't it be nice to make a character kind of like him." And, ah, my friend really knew a lot about the game, and he said, you know, there are different kinds of character you can be, and a, you can be a cleric, a warrior, a wizard, yadda yadda yadda." And he said "the kind of character that not a lot of people try to play is the rogue, because it is a tough character to play, and it's an interesting one." So, I said "sure, why not? Let's give it a try." And it is an interesting character to play, because it's a character that cannot solo. He can't work on his own, but he can just add so much to a group. So it's just a little kind of interesting character to play because everybody's constantly saying "hey, can you help me?" "hey, can you help me?" and I'm like, "sure," you know, "let's do it." You know, but I can't really go out on my own and do things because I'll just get eaten. (laughs)

Was that like the Salvatore character?

Um hm.

..because I'm not familiar with his books.

Yes, a lot like him...well, yeah kind of. A good way to describe him would be to say that he was a rogue.

So he was first based on a book character. And anything about you personally that you tried to put into the character?

Oh..not so much(laughing), no I'd say that I actually picked him because he was a lot different than I am in real life, you know. These are characters that are, you know, they're *thieves*, they're always doing questionable stuff. I'm not like that, no, so it was kind of funny to play a character that's a lot different than me in real life.

So do you find that, when you're actually playing, are you – do you behave very differently from when you're not?

Yes. I have a different mindset when I'm in the game than when I'm, you know, doing anything else.

Hm.

And it's kinda neat, because...it's not like I start taking on a different persona, or anything like that, but it's like, well, "how's the best way to do this? What's the best way to handle the situation?" and what I like about everquest so much is that it's not so much just go in there, hack and slash, it's tactics. It's thinking, it's working your way around problem-solving, and it's really interesting to do.

So, if you had a paper copy of your log I would ask you, in this last time, in the log, what was an example of the way you were sort of getting into this different mindset and being...

Sure! Okay, um, in the log that I gave you, what was happening was, uh, a member of my guild was working on her brand new epic 1.5 weapon. And what she had to do was she had to go find this monster, swarm it and then kill it. So what we had to do was as a group – this is pretty much trial and error, because this is the new Omens of War game out, so it was really neat, because nobody had ever done it, nobody had ever tried it, and we were one of the first people doing it. So I said okay, let's go out, get together, get ourselves ready, and see if we can figure out how to do it. And what we did was we went in, we engaged, had our heads handed to us, regrouped, and won – beat the critter as it were. So it was kinda neat because we had to figure out every, since you've played everquest I'm sure you've seen how like, what different situations play out – one monster will do this, one monster will do that. Well, what they're trying to do now is they're trying to make it more challenging for you by making all the critters do a little bit of something. One will cast spells, one will do dizzies, and this one very much like that. So we had to figure out what distance I had to be back to go at it inside – how to go in there and get on it. And who had to stay back and cast spells on it. It was very interesting, trial and error process, and once we got it, it was neat. Because it was like, okay, she's gone, now on to the next thing. And what was also in the log was my first attempt at trying to kill one of the monsters for my new epic. And it went badly (laughing) it just went really badly. You handed the note to the guy and he said, "Oh, I'm not happy with you!" Smash, smash, smash. And just basically took out our whole group, and I just said, oh well, gotta go back to the drawing board, figure out how things work, and come back and try again. So that's one of the things I like a lot about it, it's a game where if you fail – and you're expected to fail – you can basically look at what you did wrong, and come back and try again. You know, no one event is ever going to be exactly 100% perfect, but you can always try and do as best you can.

So, how does your role, as the rogue, as your character, fit into the trial and error, problem-solving process?

Oh – rogues are unique, because our class is the only class that really can go where no one else can. We have the ability to hide and sneak, and we can go where no one else can

go, so there's a lot. They'll send us out there to figure out what's going on, you know, what kind of critters are out there, who's gonna jump on us when we go in there to do stuff. Ah the other thing that rogues get to do a lot is if things go badly, we're the ones that pull the corpses out so that you can get resurrected and back in the game. So it's kind of a neat combination of scouting and bring everybody back so you can try again. It's really neat in that, one of the first things that my guild had me do when I got into it was they had me go to the North Temple of Veeshan, which is this gigantic zone where everything hates you. I mean, there's not a single thing there that won't attack you. So I literally had to hide and sneak and run around corners and see what kind of baddies were around and I would send tells back to people saying "okay, there's five of these here, you're gonna have to pull these in such a way so that it comes out right."

So you're doing the scouting

Um hm. And it's spooky because if something happens, nobody can help me at all. I mean, I'm basically gone, I'm dead...try again. (laugh)

How's the kind of – this sort of mindset where you're sort of the scout, sneaking, um, different from when you're at your job or with friends when there's some kind of problem-solving to be done, or you need to strategize around something?

Um well, to be honest, I've always been very much a team player. But, um, I've always been more of a leader than a follower. But, in my role, I'm not so much a leader. I'm just a guy helping out, doing what I can, just kind of a follower. And I will put my two cents in to help people out, but for the most part I listen to what has to be done then I go and do it – which is nice, the ability to just be able to follow along, take instructions, and do my job. But in real life, I've always tried to be a bit of a problem-solver – it's one of those things I've always enjoyed. In business, I'm a trainer and a salesman, so not only am I trying to teach you how to use a product, at first I'm trying to sell you a product. So, it's definitely a case where I have to have my people skills. I have to talk and be able to convince you that what I've got for you is a good thing. In everquest, that's not a factor. Nobody gets, you don't get to talk to people. You can type to talk, but there's so much you can do with your voice, you gestures, your mannerisms that really effects people in real life but in a game, all you can say is, you can type, and people can read it and they either buy what you're saying or they don't. and that's really a big difference, and it's kind of helped me in work, because, being able to just understand that you know, it's not always – you can't always just talk you way into a situation, you have to be able to explain in the fewest amount of words possible how to do something right, how to get something done. It's really been quite helpful, to be honest with you.

The way in EQ that you kind of have to, consider your words...

Very carefully. You have a short amount of space or a short amount of time. Because, one of the things I've noticed with doing sales is that you only catch people in the first five minutes of the presentation. So you have to go in there right from the beginning and kind of capture the audience and say "here's why what I'm offering you is good for you. Here's why it's going to be a beneficial thing to you." That's really been a good asset.

It's interesting, because it sounds like at the same time, when you're in EQ you're sort of able to take a back seat.

Yes

Like, when you're guild raid is going on, you're trying to do this very big thing, you sort of do what you're told and you know what your role is going to be

Um hm very much so. It's very much, because our raids are generally anywhere from 50 to 70 people, and you get that many people together, if there's too much chatter, nothing gets done. So, what you're constantly doing is, you're keeping quiet, you're listening to what needs to go on and then you try to do your job as well as possible. One of the things that I've noticed is that my guild is very relaxed and laid back, we do a lot of neat things, but we're not one of these guilds that raids like 5 or 6 times a week, we raid like 2 or 3 times a week, so it's pretty much whenever people can get on, we have a good time, we group together, but when we raid, it's fun because everyone enjoys themselves, we have a good time, and even though it may be a lot of work to do what we're doing, in the end it's a lot of fun because we're all working together towards a common goal, and when we click, it's really neat to see.

Hm. When's a time that happened, when you clicked?

Acutally, this Sunday, we took down Rallos Zek the warlord, in the Plane of Tactics. He's considered the big Plane of Power guy. And was happened was we said, okay, a lot of people need this flag, and let's just get it done, so we uh got everybody together and we went over to Tactics, so we got it going and everybody did their job, and what was normally a very ugly fight was done in a very short amount of time with almost no deaths at all.

Wow.

So it was really neat to see. I mean, because, in a way it's kind of funny when you see everybody wipe – I mean, you go in there with this big huge raid force and you see this one little critter take everybody out. It's kinda funny when you see that because it's like, okay, let's start all over again – we've got to go back to the beginning and start over again. It's also neat when you see everybody paying attention, working as a whole together. It's so neat because we're such an eclectic guild. We've got people from the east coast, west coast, europe, we have two players from taiwan. Yeah, it's really quite neat. It's interesting because you get a real kind of a melting pot view, because no two people see it exactly the same way. And it's kind of neat when you see european players come to play at 10 o'clock our time, which is like 2 or 3 in the morning their time. (I look suprised) Yeah, that's what I did, when I first said "wait a minute, you're from london, and you're playing now – it's like 2 o'clock in the morning – what are you doing?" he was like, "well, I wanted to be in an american guild so, I play." I've often wondered about what it would be like as an american to go onto one of the european servers or everquest and kind of poke around a little bit and see what it's like.

Well, what do you think?

I think it'd be fun. I think it'd be different, uh, the fact that there is such a time difference would make for some interesting things, because there's a different mindset of people who play in the mornings versus people who play at night. So, for me to be playing at my morning or afternoon and they're evening would be kind of neat. I actually got a chance once to see an asian guild at work. There are a couple of asian guilds on my server, and it kind of works out perfectly for them because they're usually playing very early in the morning, so no one else is on the game, so it's really kind of neat to see them do it. People think they're hard core in this country – they haven't seen anything yet! The Asians, my god – they're military!

Really?

Oh my god, I couldn't get over it! I mean, like everybody knew everything. They clearly had done so much research. They read everything there was to know about what they were going after. And as a result, they never fail, but, I think that takes some of the fun out of the game. Some of the fun of the game is going in and not knowing, figuring it out as you go along. Because if you know exactly what's going to go on, the challenge is only either you have enough people or you don't. and they always have enough people, so they do just fine.

So about the people in your guild, are they the people you're usually playing with, even when there's not a raid?

Pretty much. I do, I used to group a lot with people outside the guild, and the major reason I don't do it anymore is you can have a really great group of people, but you don't know anybody in your group at all, and you can also end up grouping with a bunch of people except you've got one or two idiots. And it's really sad when you see what would be a really great group having a lot of fun and you've got one person who doesn't know their job who makes it horrible for everyone. One of the things you see a lot in everquest is you see people buy characters on ebay. So, sure you'll have a 65 wizard, but who's only played the game for one or two weeks, so you don't know what to do. When people tell you what to do but you have no clue what they're talking about, it kind of makes it really frustrating. I remember one time, before I joined my guild, I was grouping a lot with these friends – different people, I would put them on my friends list, and it was kind of neat because they were from all around the country. No two people were from the same area. I was the only person from New England, and you had people from Texas, California, Idaho, whatnot, and it was kinda neat working with them. I would actually say that I've developed friendships with people who I will probably never ever see. It's kind of like you were saying, people will talk to each other. You know, one of my good friends was this lady from Ohio, she's just one heck of a gamer. I've never met her in real life – we've talked a few times on email here and there, but we also just talk in game and it's so neat because we'll talk about what's going on in our lives and what not and it's just a lot of fun.

So, some of these people on your friends list, you know pretty closely.

I would say yes. Not to many of my real life friends play everquest anymore. A lot of them have switched to the new games like Star Wars Galaxies and such, and a lot of them are waiting for everquest II to come out, so they haven't really been playing a lot.

What about talking to this friend from Ohio – how is it different from talking with somebody..

..just down the street?

Yes

Um, there's a safety net. There's a little bit of anonymity, because you know that you don't physically know this person. So you can be a little bit more open and honest. you know, it's nice because you're not trying to impress someone, you're not trying to have the politics that are involved with your friendships, it's just, just talk. Being very forthright and honest, and you can say what you mean without having to sugar-coat it. Which is a nice thing.

Hm. So it sounds almost contradictory – like anonymity and it allows you to be more open and honest at the same time. Are there things that you wouldn't say to a friend in EQ?

That I wouldn't say to a real life friend versus a friend in EQ?

Sure

No, not so much. I mean, I can talk about things in EQ very much, you know talk about what's going on there quite easily, but um, what I've noticed is that with my real life friends, is you know, you've known someone for a long time you're invested with them, whereas with a real life friend, if they're doing something that's wrong, or doing something self-destructive, you know, you're going to try and help them, but to a certain point you're going to pull back because you don't want to hurt your friend. Whereas, if somebody tells you something in EQ, I'm just gonna say "hey, look, that's a bad thing, you shouldn't be doing it, you should give it up." One of the people that I used to work with a lot, he told me straight out that he was into cocaine. I was like "what are you doing, you're wrecking your life." You know, he was straightforward about it – he told me how he got started and why he's continuing to use, I mean, he was very dispassionate. He was able to say, straightforward to me, whereas if he was a friend he would probably put in some rationales, like it was because of this, or I could give it up anytime. And that's not so much the way he was. He was like "here's why I'm doing it, here's why I continue to do it" and I was able to come right back and him and say, well, you understand that this is what's going to happen as a result, that you're going to be causing yourself and your relatives a lot of injury because you decide to do this. And you know, I don't judge him. I just tell him look, you're doing the wrong thing, and it's gonna cause you problems, and I think a lot of people, like you say, you mention anonymity, there is a feeling of being able to talk to someone, who you don't see, who you don't know – well, you know and you don't know – gives you a bit of openness. and that's how things function.

Can you think of a time when you were ever able to say something, and sort of come right out and talk about it, when maybe you wouldn't have been able to say it to a friend face to face?

Yes I have. Um..when my father, my father was in the hospital about two years ago, very, very ill. He recovered, but during that whole time it was very traumatic. And my real life friends were, you know, being very supportive, doing their best to help me out, and they kept saying "everything is going to be okay, everything is going to be okay," as a real life friend would. But my friends in game were like, "yeah, you know, everything should be, get better," but they also said "hey look, you know, if it happens, you know, he's had a good life, he's really done a lot of things with his life, you know." They were able to say to me, "look, you'll go on, you'll continue." I found comfort in that. I really did. Because it was nice to hear them straight up and say "look, nobody wants him to pass away, but if he does, you'll continue. You will go on." And uh, none of my real life friends were like that. They were all like, they were all putting the best face on. They were like, "come on, he's a fighter, he'll do just fine," and, to be honest and clear, it was really close – it was nip tuck for quite some time, and he did recover, but if he hadn't, I think the fact that I was able to get a, get friends in game to tell me, you know, it's a natural process. It's what happens. It gave me a release – a pressure release. And it was a good thing.

It was relieving to hear people be that supportive, but bluntly honest at the same time...

Yes, exactly

...in a way that real life friends...

..real life friends won't. they'll say "hey look, you know, everything's going to be okay, you're going to get through this, everybody's going to be just fine." And, I'm sorry, that's not the way real life works, you know. It was a good thing, I'll say.

And this all happened in game, not through message boards?

No, in game. In game. Uh, I go to the message boards, but to be honest I use them more as a tool. Just to find information if I'm looking for something, or if somebody's asking a question I'll send a response in, just, how you do this. But I don't really open up on the boards myself. I don't do it. I just, I talk. I view them as a tool. Much like a phone or anything else. Here's how you do this, how do I do that?

So when this was going on with your dad, you were getting support from people, were you telling people in guildspeak, "this is what happened," were you sending people tells to particular people...

Tells. I didn't just go off asking for everyone to hear, it was more like I would talk in tell to people and they would send replies and I'd reply back, we'd just kind of go back and forth. In guildspeak I always try to keep a level of professionalism. I mean, I'm a bit of a jokester, I love to tell jokes and stuff like that, but when I'm 'on the clock' as it were, I try and be very professional.

What is EQ professionalism?

Doing the job right. You know, not constantly making wise remarks. Because one of the things that will happen is, if someone's trying to explain a very difficult encounter to you, and they're typing away as fast as they can to get it off, it doesn't really help if there are 20 or 30 people sounding off, putting in little wise cracks and cute little remarks. I mean, sure it's funny, but it also detracts from your goal of trying to get what you really want. And, um, while it is a game, very much so, it's also a challenge. It's a very hard challenge, and if you don't take it seriously (laughs), you'll have a poor experience, because it's – sure it's fun to attempt and to do, but I mean, winning is best. I mean, didn't somebody say winning isn't everything, it's the only thing? You know, I mean, that's kind of the way you have to do it when you do something serious. Versus, just having fun, getting together to group. So I would say professionalism would be, when you're in a raid. When you're trying to do something very difficult, or trying to do something for the first time. You know, be serious. Think seriously, don't be a fool. Whereas, if you're just goofing around with people, grinding out experience, who cares if you make fun? That's the fun part. That's the junk food, that's the dessert as it were.

I see. But you want a diet of only EQ junk food? You want to have raids.

You want to have raids. That's right. The raids are where you get to challenge yourself as a player. One of the things that I found out when I first started playing is there's two types of players: there are people that like to go in there and socialize and that's good. I have no problem with that, I think it's a wonderful thing. But, there's other people that, they're really into the game, and the whole, they work the numbers. I remember watching a case where, we were doing a raid and this one particular person who was in the guild wanted to figure out what each individual person was doing in the way of damage. So they actually parsed out the damage for every single individual person on that raid. And they showed like, what your average was, what your maximum was, what your minimum was, and you know, I was floored. Because they posted on the guild webpage I was like, oh my god, A. how did you have the time, B. how did you do this?

And they did it. And it's gotten to the point where a lot of people love it so much that whenever we do a big raid they actually parse the damage for everybody who's in the raid. And you know, as a rogue, my big thing is damage per second, so I'm always trying to improve that, so it's really neat to go back...

Like a scoreboard, you can move up on it?

Yes and no, because you never expect like, a cleric, to have a lot of damage, their job is to heal people. So, between the rogues, yeah, it's a scoreboard. But, it's only competition between ourselves. I'm never trying to say, am I better than this class or better than that class, because one of the things that was so important about picking your character in the beginning was, you need to understand, what is your role? Are you gonna be a healer? Are you gonna be a warrior? Are you gonna be somebody whose job is to cast spells? Or is your job gonna be like mine, damage per second? I kind of decided to do that. And it was neat to go on the forum boards, after I first started being the character, and it showed, you know, it said, here's the best class do this type of job or that type of job, and it was kinda neat to see, yeah rogues were designed to do one thing, but we do other things really kinda well. So it was kinda a fun thing to find out. And it was interesting – my real life friend who got me into the game, he moved on to star wars galaxies, and he said, there's an interesting thing about what's been going on with everquest over the years. The way he terms it, I don't particularly agree, but I'll give it to you anyway, he says that they've been dumbing down, to a certain extent, making things easier for characters, making so that you can do a lot of things you couldn't do before. And, it drives away some of the hard core gamers because..well, I'll give you an example. In the Planes of Power, there were zones that you had to get keys for. And what happened was about 2 years ago, Sony just opened them up – said if you're level 65 you can go in this zone. So a lot of the hard core gamers who had done the work to get this key, and then it's just pointless, you don't need it anymore. And they're like, if you're going to dumb it down so much, why should we continue to play? My personal view is, yeah they made it a little bit easier, because it was so hard for certain people. But they said okay, now that you've done this, here's the new challenge. Try, you know the Lost Dungeons of Norrath or Omens of War. Here's these new areas to go in and try and be the first to do. I don't think they dumbed it down so much as they opened the content up. Certain, you know, because it was so hard to get this one particular thing you just had to put hours and hours of grind time, that when they finally opened it up, it wasn't so much that they were dumbing it down, they were like, look, people wanna see this content and we wanna add new content, so let's just open this up so people can see it, and give the new content to those who've already done it. And one thing that I find is funny – people are getting into the whole player versus player, very much so. The whole thing with star wars galaxies, worlds of warcraft, lineage II. Everquest is one of the few remaining massively multiplayer online games that is player versus content, or environment. And I kinda like that, because I've never been one that says, let me go out there and kill this person. I don't wanna go out there and go after people – I wanna go after critters. I was talking with him about it, and he said, it's really good to be able to go out and be able to take out these two or three people, and kind of knock them down and brag a little once you're done. And I was like, that's not really what I'm all about. I'm more about taking on the challenge that's there, and see how we can do. Like, one of the things that we're famous for as a guild, is we will try and do an encounter with as few

people as possible. Say the encounter says you need like, 54, well we'll try to do it with 50 or 45. You know, we fail sometimes, but one of the things we try is...to do things better. To try and to take what's there and see if we can...make it a little more challenging for us.

Hm...you know, I'm still curious about, I hear you talking a lot about enjoying the challenge of the game, and getting to certain landmarks, and I'm still wondering about this dark elf you based your character on, who, as you talk to me about him, sounds like, that you're in general the helper, the scout, the one who saves everybody when you wipe, and when you first mentioned the Salvatore character, he sounded kind of dark...

Ah! But you see the thing is, he's a hero, but he comes from a race that's evil. He himself is not. He is an outcast from the race because he's a good guy. So, that's kind of what I wanted, what I was going for when I created him. And it's interesting, because by choosing a sort of evil race, I had to overcome the fact that he was evil to be accepted in good places. So it was kinda neat. It was a lot of fun going to places where originally they'd say, ohh, dark elf! We will kill you because you're evil. And then, working faction so that okay, now you can come on in.

So you actually played some of this character development within the game.
mm-hm. It's kind of neat. A really interesting thing to me is, they don't really punish you one way or another for deciding what morale you are. If you want to be evil, good, there's all kinds of routes you can go, and you can be evil and do just fine. But if you want to be an evil character that does good, it's a challenge. It's hard. You have to work. You have to do a little bit more to try and counterbalance that. Just as if you were trying to be a high elf who wanted to go be evil, you'd have to work really hard for the evil races to say, yeah, come on in, we like assassins like you or something like that.

Is this something that you think, do you communicate this through your actions with other people when you're grouping? Something that you role play?

Um, I love the role-play aspect when I'm doing quests and stuff like that, but when I'm grouping with people, it's pretty much just an us versus them mentality. It's not like oh, I'm a dark elf who does good, it's more like, you're gonna need to do, cast this spell to go after this person, or do this to go after that person. It's not so much, I don't take on the persona.

You're more pragmatic

Yes.

So, it makes me curious, you're playing this dark elf guy who most people think is evil, but in fact a good guy, and you are in fact a pretty big guy, who could look rather imposing, but so far seem pretty nice. Is this a parallel, with your everyday life?

Yeah, he's is spritely little dude, he's tiny. He's not what they would call robust by any stretch of the imagination. I've always been aware of my size – I was a football player in high school and college, I used to bounce at bars before I got my professional job, but you know, it's not who I am. And I think I got kind of used to people seeing me as one way when they first met me, it's like ooh, he's this big guy, burly guy, they see me wearing my biker jacket and whatnot and you think I'm gonna be some really bad person. It's really not. I'm really laid back most of the...I try not to offend people if I can. So, yeah, to a certain extent I would say my character is a parallel to me in certain ways.

Because people see him as one thing but he's not. And that's a lot what I am too. It's one of the things I kind of had to overcome in business, because when I would first go out, people see the bald head, the beard and all and think I'm some cro-magnon, but it wasn't until they talk to me and got a little chance to get to know me, they understood, hey, here's this guy who's just trying to do a job. The way he lives his lifestyle isn't something that effects the way he works.

That makes me curious again about, when you were saying that, you felt the way you use your words has changed outside of Everquest. How does that work? Can you think of a time when you used your words differently?

Sure. When I first started working for this company, I was very much in a support role. I was very much, you know, send him out, teach the client how to use the program, or teach these people how to do it. And one of the things that I dealt with in a lot of cases was resistance, because I was basically teaching people who were in their 50s and 60s, who had never touched a computer before, to not only use a computer for the first time, but to also get into a computerized schedule program when they had used pencil and paper for the longest time. And when I first did it, you know, you kind of try to just lecture, you know, here's how you do it. And I could tell that I was losing people. I could always see it. I'd see it in their eyes that I was losing them, and I'd think, I'm doing something wrong here. And one of the things that I've learned is, if you can make yourself concise, if you can – don't use 20 words when five will do. EQ kinda taught me that, because if you type this big long sentence in EQ, and if you're in a raid or a situation when the spool is just scrolling by so fast, and you know people will ignore big long sentences because they don't have time. But if you can say it in five words, you know – must go here. (laughs) something like that, it gets your point across. And I've noticed that in business. I had to go up to Vermont one time, basically this was one of my first sales calls. And, I first started to treat it like it was a training situation. And I knew right away that it wasn't working, because it's like wow, you know, I'm not catching. They're not staying with me. So I took a break. And when I came back, I was much more brief. I kept it to the point, and that's when I started to see, people were more like, oh, that's what he's talking about. One of the things that I, that's kind of what got me to the point that I like sales, because you're dealing with people, but it's not so much you're only trying to sell a product, you're standing up there selling yourself, because you have to say, I represent this product, and I know what I'm talking about, and I know what I can do to help your agency out. The homecare industry is so difficult, because it's something that's getting pinched on all sides, but you're also dealing with old-school mentality. You'd be amazed at all the agencies that operate and still just use pencil and paper to schedule their visits. I'd say that most of them do. So here I am trying to bring these people into the modern-day world, and also at the same time, you know, even though we're bringing you into technological times, we're not trying to remove from them the fact that their taking care of people. A lot of times people, a lot of cases when I'm doing support people are like "you know you're doing God's work." And I'm like, no I don't really see that myself. I know we're helping people, sure. But, to me it was always just a job. And that's kind of what I want to bring to them. You know, yes, we're bringing you into this, but you're still doing the same job you were before. We're just trying to make it so it works a little better for you.

So, hm...let me see if there are any questions I haven't asked you about. What about the role of EQ in the rest of your life? It's something that you enjoy reading about.

I've always loved science fiction. My mother a teacher, and from a very early age she instilled a love of reading in me. I was not, growing up, someone who played Dungeons and Dragons or anything like that. It just wasn't my idea of fun. I was always someone who preferred to read and let my imagination fill in everything. And what kinda happened was when I got to college, a lot of my friends were gamers and just played games on the computer and what not, and, you know, I kinda got pulled into it just because, you're hanging out with everyone who's playing a racing game and you're probably going to pick up the remote and give it a try. And that kinda is how EQ started for me. One of my good friends, who was a friend who I respected, said here's this thing, give it a try. And it just happened to catch me and I loved it. As for the books and whatnot, I was just very interested because first off I'm a big fan of R.A. Salvatore, so when I saw that on the cover I was like "wow!" It wasn't until I bought it I noticed, oh by the way, he [another author] wrote it. I thought Salvatore wrote it. I also thought it was kinda neat because it was the first book published about Everquest. So I thought, oh I'll give it a try. And it doesn't hurt that the character is a rogue.

So how often do you play now?

Oh..let's say 20 to 25 hours a week. Something like that. If it's a light week for me at work and I can sneak in a little more time, I might push 30 but that's a maximum.

And when do you play?

Usually weeknights. We raid Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. I will usually make one to two raids a week, but one Sunday I'll try and make the Sunday raid if I can because that's when a lot of people show up and a lot of my friends are online, so that's when a lot of the fun happens.

Was there ever a time when EQ cut into other things in your life, when you had to give up..

Oh yeah, there have been certain times when I've had to turn down things because a raid was going on or something. My friends, who constantly come over, they'll see me on the computer and they're like "alright, get off the computer now." (Laughs) cause they know, if they can't get me off as soon as they get there, there's a pretty good chance I'll stay on.

Do you get off?

Yeah. They can usually pull me off. I was acutally in a relationship until about a year ago, and uh, it was kind of- it wasn't an issue of friction so much with my girlfriend, it was a case where I said, look, here's something I really enjoy, why don't you give it a try. And I got her addicted to the game, and that was kinda neat, because I got to play the mentor. She just started off, she created a level one character and worked her way through. She never did become hard core, but she still plays. To this day she still plays. And it's interesting to see that a lot of people who don't know anything about the game will figure it's just some hack and slash game, but if you give them a little bit of the background, you let them create a character, and it will catch most people who give it a try. If they give it an honest try, it will catch them. It's that fun.

Most people?

Most people. I mean, the people who hate the game are the people who wouldn't try it anyway. But if you're somebody that is at all interested in the whole fantasy world and gaming at all, it will probably get ya. As for having to give up things, yeah. I remember one time a friend of mine had tickets to a concert. You know, and I was moderately interested in going, but when I saw on the guild message board, oh, we're taking down this uber-rare critter, so I was like, yeah, here's my ticket.

In the relationship you said it wasn't really a point of contention – you played together.

Yeah, I was smart enough to see that look, be inclusive. Don't say here's my game, why don't you go and do your thing. That wasn't going to fly. So I said listen, why don't you give it a try. Just as, you know, she's a very big, avid opera fan. I like the theatre. I truly do, but I've never been big on opera. It's not my thing. I like plays, I like musicals, just opera never caught. But it was important to her, so I said okay, let's do it. Let's go out and try, and you know, I've been to – (city name) Stage Company, they carry a lot of stuff, a lot of opera, so it's kinda neat. You know, we used to go, we'd dress up, I'd dress up in a tuxedo – well, not in a tuxedo, but in a suit and everything. Very prim and proper and I liked it. Not so much that I liked the opera, but it made her happy that I was going, and you know I didn't have to fake enthusiasm – I just said okay, it's important to you, so it's important to me, let's do it, and she was able to do that with eq as well. She was able to say, it's important to you, therefore it's important to me and I'll be able to try. I know a lot of people who have definitely wrecked their relationships because of EQ. In fact one of my good online friends ended up getting divorced because of it.

Wow.

Well, he was hard, I mean really hard core player. Any time I logged on, he was on. He was somebody who obviously just, you know, I don't even remember what he did for work but it was something that he could work out of home, so he's just on the computer all the time. And his wife just hated it. Hated the fact that you know, when they were, she wanted to do something, he'd be like, well there was this raid, or this fight, or whatever, and I tried to explain it to him. I said look, you've got to prioritize. It's just a game. I mean, it's a fun game, but it's just a game. You know, she's your wife! Let's balance things out a little bit: wife, game, wife, game. He, in my opinion, made the wrong choice, but, once again, that's his call.

What was it like playing with your girlfriend? Would you guys work together?

Absolutely loved it loved it loved it. Not only is it fun to play with people you know in real life, cause you know, you can just lean over and say hey hon, you wanna do this, or whatever. But it was also fun because she – I got to be a bit of a mentor to her, I helped her powerlevel her character along and get from level 1 to level 40 much faster than I did, so it was a lot of fun. I enjoyed it. And, it's kinda like..okay. a good analogy would be to think about it like – Halloween. When you're a kid. It's a lot of fun. Once you hit, like, 13, 14, it's nothing. You don't go out and trick-or-treat, you go to parties. But as an adult, being able to take your kids out, get them into costume, take them out trick-or-treating, the fun comes back. It's a different kind of fun, but it's even better. That's kind of how I relate to it.

You were taking her trick-or-treating.

You betcha. You betcha. I got to take her to all these zones that I knew really well. I said, go in there and just keep running. (laugh) Just keep running! And you know it was

really neat showing her things that she'd never seen, watching her go "ooh" and "ahh" and wow, that's kinda fun. Cause there are all these zones in Everquest that are just literally meant to be fun. There is this one zone where you go in and as soon as you step into it, you're transformed into something else like a rabbit or a giant or something like that, and it's called Grieg's End.

Ah

And when you went into Grieg's End, there was this enchantment that made you look different. So, you know I didn't tell her, the first time we went in (laughing) so the first time she went in, instead of being this warrior that she plays, she was turned into this little halfling. She was like, what the hell did you do to me? I was like, ehh...here I am this little elf, I'm turned into this big ogre. I thought it was so much fun, you know.

Did you keep playing with the same people? I'm thinking about how you said sometimes you can be more blunt with people online than you could be otherwise, but now you're sort of mixing playing with someone that you know very well, right next to you...

Well, it was kinda funny, because what I did was I told the people that I played online with that this was my girlfriend, so that kinda instantly gave her status with them, so, well, because they knew me and respected me. So they said, oh well, it's his girlfriend, you gotta treat her right. And you know they would constantly help her out when she was doing stuff and I wasn't online. And, uh, you know, it was definitely a case where I grouped with the same people mostly, I mean a couple of people I knew weren't just gonna fly. Because these were guys who tended to be more on the rude and a bit on the crass side. That's how they were. And I said yeah, let's not group with them because I knew five minutes in she'll be pissed and better to avoid.

Do you mind that kind of stuff, though?

How do you mean?

When these sort of people are characteristically rude and crass, do you play with them?

Not much. Not much. I used to, more because they were really really good players, and they were kinda teaching me the ropes. I'd be like gritting my teeth and wouldn't respond. But once I got to the point where I was good enough to play, where I knew the right people to go with, not so much. In fact, it's kinda an interesting thing. I'm one of the people that, if people start cursing in guildchat, I'll be one of the first people, I'll be like, look. Language. Well, because, I'd say 90% of the people that play in our guild are over 21, there still are a couple of 14 and 13 years old. And you know, there's no reason to drop the F-bomb every third second. It's, I'll use it when I'm talking with my friends, sure, but I know my friends. I don't wanna make it an unpleasant experience for anyone, and we have a very strict guild policy, you know, no racial epitaphs. Ever. You use that kind of stuff, you're out of here. And you know I really agree with that. And in fact I've been in cases where I've been in a group with someone, and they'll start talking like that, and I'll warn them. I'll say look, you know, I don't wanna hear that. You wanna send tells to people, you go ahead and do that, but when you start doing that stuff around me I'm gonna disband, and I have. If you're gonna start, you know, just being unpleasant, there's no reason to stick with somebody whose being like that.

Hmm..just lost my train of thought

(laughs) sorry!

Oh, these people that you know through your guild, or people on your friends list, have you ever met somebody, face to face, that you didn't know beforehand?

Oh yes

How did it go?

It was kind of funny, because what happened was, this person I had met through the game, she actually lived in [same state as M] and neither one of us knew it until we'd known each other in game for like, close to a year. And then just in conversation it came up, oh, I happened to mention how nice it was in [state] and she was like, wait a minute, you're from [state]? I was like, yeah! Where are you from? She was like [state]! So it was kinda fun, you know we actually did end up meeting up. Felt kinda, kinda got to chit chat a little bit and it was definitely kind of a fun experience, cause, you know, you see somebody's character, and that's all you ever see. Then when you meet them in real life you've got these kind of expectations already, and you know it's kind of fun to meet somebody and oh, you know, how are you doing and stuff. It was really interesting because she was a paraplegic. She was somebody who had every right to be bitter, but she just was a real bubbly personality. I still remain in contact with her. We don't really hang out much, just cause it's a bit of a hike for her to get, you know she lives down in [town] and so it's like an hour and a half drive for her plus it's a bit of a hardship for her. But we still talk in game and you know, she sends me emails every now and then with funny stuff. I never knew it, but there's this underculture of handicapped humor that is – and she sends to me, and it's the funniest stuff you're ever going to see.

Huh

I know, and she said to me, she sent me this picture, um, 6 women in wheelchairs, and they're just wheeling themselves to the park, and you see a sign that says "steep incline ahead" and they're like "what do you mean?" and there's like there's this steep, like 70%, almost like dropoff and you walk to and you're like "Aah!" rolling down it. And at the end it just says "beware of dropoff." And she sends it to me all the time. She sends me wheelchair jokes, and I laugh. I know I shouldn't – I know I'm going to hell for laughing, but it's just so funny.

I think if a paraplegic sends it to you, you don't go to hell for laughing.

(laughs) I mean I don't forward them, but I definitely get a good giggle out of them.

So this may be hard to do, looking back through already having met her, but what were your expectations going into it, and how did it come up that you decided to meet?

Um well basically what had happened was we had been talking about how we were both from [state] for the longest time, and said look, you know I live in [town] if you ever want to come up and meet. I said, you know, for the longest time I was sort of back and forth about whether I should do it, because you know, to a certain extent, like you said there's expectations that get built up. You know, what if I meet here and she's not someone I've ever met before and not someone I would ever talk with and maybe she feels the same way when she meets me. And so what basically happened was I had to go down there for a client meeting and I said look, you know, I'm going to be done by 5 o'clock, would you like to maybe meet and grab a cup of coffee or maybe some drinks? She said sure, I know this really nice cyber-café, I go there a lot, why don't we meet there. And the whole time she'd never told me she was paraplegic. Not once. So, she said, she's like I'll be wearing a sweater that says "Yale" on it and stuff like that, and I

come in, I see this girl in a wheelchair, and I said [her name]? And she was like, M? oh my god! You know, we spent like the next two or three hours just talking, getting to know each other. Yeah, it was really kinda neat. So, there was definitely some trepidation, looking up, leading up to it. I wasn't going to cancel on her, but I was definitely a little nervous going in. but, once I met her, you know, the way she was in game was the way she was in real life, she just has this really incredible sense of humor and just constantly disarms you. You just laugh till you hurt – she's that funny. And I'm glad we did meet. I've had invitations you know, to go to New York or something like that for like, uh, fan faires, but to be honest, it's not my cup of tea. I don't go to conventions, I don't go to, you know, comic-con, it's not my style. You know, I'm not that into it. You know, most of my guild, I sent them pictures of me in real life riding my motorcycle, here you go, that's me. And just about everybody in the guild has sent in a real life picture of themselves. So it's kinda neat, because once again, like you said, you see this person who's a little halfling in game, but it's a mountain of a man in real life. And it's kinda neat there are a lot of bikers in our guild, and we'll end up talking about motorcycles. And it's kinda funny, because we'll be in a raid and some guy will be talking about what he did to his sportster to give it a little more umph, and people will be like, okay, enough of the bike talk. we're in game now. (laugh)

Is it off limits?

Oh no

I mean, talking about real life?

Oh no, very much so. I mean like, when we were raiding last night, and I was watching the [American League baseball championship] game and I was giving people updates as the game was going on. You know, it's definitely not a case where people – it's not like you assume this role-playing identify, it's more like if we're taking on somebody really tough let's talk about the game because we have to concentrate.

(jokingly) You were playing while you were watching the game?

Yeah. Blasphemer, I know.

You're a blasphemer?

Yeah, I shoulda been watching the game, I know. I'm a diehard Sox fan. Dad did the indoctrination early, took me to Fenway when I was a little boy, gave me my little Fenway cap and my Red Sox shirt, and everything, so I've always loved the Red Sox. And I was tempted. I was about ready to say hey, let's just, I'll be on again, but they said hey look, we really need a rogue on, so I said okay I'll be on, but I'm watching the game, so don't expect my "A" game as it were. You know, I'm gonna be just a little distracted here.

So you're not usually watching television or doing something else while you're playing?

No. I'll usually just be playing the game. I don't like to watch tv and play because my attention just gets distracted too much. You know, I like to focus on what I'm doing. Unless I'm just messing around, having fun, then I'll be listening to music or whatnot. But, usually my favorite thing is to raid. I enjoy it. So when I'm doing that, I'm focused on that.

Well, I think we've covered a lot, let me see if there is anything I've forgotten to ask you...well, is there anything that I haven't asked that you would like me to know, or that seem important.

Um, I think you managed to cover a lot of bases, especially in the area you're looking to find out about. You know one of the things about playing that a lot of people don't know, that have never played the game and have only heard the terms is that, there's just a real eclectic group of people that play it. I know people from Red Sox starting pitchers to bouncers and bartenders to lawyers to doctors to teachers to – a lot of different people play. And the thing that I've also found is that the majority of the people who do play the game are older. Not younger. It's more of an adult's game than a kid's game. I think partly because it is challenging. It is a game where, it's definitely a risk versus reward type of game. Meaning that, the higher the challenge the better the payoff as it were and a lot of kids get frustrated when you have to put so much effort into something that, you know, is tough to do. So the thing I think is very interesting is that it's a kid's game in the fact that it is a game, it's a computer game, but it's more of an adult's game because you have to put an adult kind of mentality to it. You can't just take things kinda come as they are kind of situation. You've got to put some work into it.

Hmm. It doesn't fit the stereotype.

Yeah

Or the stereotype is wrong

Well, I don't know if the stereotype is wrong, I know a lot of kids who play it who are fantastic players, but I think that a lot of people who say, oh, well, it's just something that little kids play – that's not the way it is.

Appendix 9: D interview

So I take it that's your log?

Yeah, I didn't print it out, I didn't know if you wanted it printed...

Oh, that's okay, I can print it out. Um, maybe we can start with what was going on when you were logging?

Um, pretty much, I don't know if you ever played the game...

Um hm

Well, I'm in a guild, and we're doing a raid, uh, so there's not much chat going on, there's just instructions.

Um hm

...of what to do, how to do it. And, uh, a little bit of chat, but...just battlespam, heal spams.

Is that your favorite thing, the guild raids?

Uh, it's pretty much the only thing that keeps me going with this game. Otherwise I would've burnt out a while ago. So it's mainly the people you meet. You know, you wanna log in and...you know.

Well, I'll definitely want to ask you about that, but maybe we can start with the character that you play most often?

Um, well, he's a rogue. And I made him about 4 and a half years ago, so...kind of attached to him. I thought about deleting him a few times, just to get rid of the game, but I actually got into it with my brother, and we were always big into video games and Nintendo and stuff like that, and I probably wouldn't have stayed in the game as long if it wasn't for playing with him. But he has since moved on and quit. So, I kinda took over his character, which is a ranger. But my character M__, the rogue, he's pretty high level. He's actually the highest level you can attain, so...

Oh. The new highest level, 70?

Yeah

Wow!

Well, that's what I do – I go to work at night and I go home...it's pretty much what I do. And for me, it's like, I justify it by, you know, it's a cheap form of entertainment. You know, I could go out, to a bar or whatever, like I used to and spend a lot of money, but you know, it's pretty cheap. It's a very interesting game, you know, I like it a lot.

What went into, when you first made M__?

Um, I don't know. I always felt kinda like, I guess more of a diabolical person inside, so I picked the rogue. And uh, and then that movie, uh, you know the one that was in Rome, and he was like a...Gladiator

Gladiator?

Yeah, and I was actually, my name was going to be Maximus, after him, just, you know, picking a name, but someone already had it. But nothing, you know, I didn't think I'd be playing the game five years down the road when I first started. (laughs)

So, when you say you're sort of a diabolical person on the inside, is M__ mostly like you?

Um, well, when I'm playing the game, it kinda takes me out of reality – whatever else. I guess I kinda project a little of myself onto him, and vice versa. Uh, not so much diabolical in a evil or bad way, but just sort of like sneaky. Um, like in the shadows type

of person, like more intent on just sitting back. Like I'm not an outspoken person within the game, I just am kinda quiet, so that's I guess how I am in real life – like that.

What about the vice versa part, projecting your character back onto you?

Um, well, for a while it was...I got really heavily into the game. That's really all I would do, was work and play the game, so while I was at work I would think about what I'd be doing tomorrow in the game, or looking up on the Safehouse [Everquest-related website] quests and stuff like that. So I kinda got a little too much into it.

How much were you playing then?

Um, probably like 50 hours a week. Probably down to like 30, 24.

What made you decide to cut back?

Um, well my brother quit. He actually...it's funny that you're doing it [the study] on relationships because he met a girl online, in the game, that has since moved out here and lives with him, and you know, they formed a relationship. But you know, and that's who I would play with a lot. But since they moved on and really don't log in. I still, you know, log in every day, but it's not much. And back then I didn't have a girlfriend or anything, which now I do, so...she doesn't like me playing too much (laughs).

Oh, she cuts into your game time?

Yeah. (laughs) and when I do, she doesn't – she's not like, too happy about it.

No, what happens?

Well, like, raid, my guild raid generally raids on the weekends. All day Saturday, like 8 hours or 9 hours, and then Sunday the same thing. And, uh, for the most part she's just like sitting around watching tv, which I guess she gets bored with. And then she'll start bugging me looking for attention, or trying to get my attention. Um, and I've gotten in fights about it with her. So it can be a destructive thing in a relationship, definitely.

Do you remember the last time this happened, that it escalated into a fight?

Um, pretty much every weekend. (laughs)

Yeah?

Yeah

So, last weekend, you guys live together, right?

Yeah.

And you're playing, and she's...in the same room?

Well, I told her before I got started that, you know, I'm really into this game and that's pretty much what I like to do, um, you know, in my free time, so I guess she, I told her you know, you can deal with it, or I'll try to balance it out, but I'm not gonna quit. Until I want to. Because I told her, then I'll just resent her. You know, because that's just...and also I look at it as a hobby. You know, a lot of people build models or whatever. But, I guess it can be counterproductive, just sitting in front of a computer screen all day, but...it's...I can think of a million things worse I could be doing. (laughs) but I could probably think of a million things better I could be doing (laughs).

Well, I was going to say that it sounds like it's an important part of your life that you wanted your girlfriend to accept, but it sounds like you're kind of hesitant about saying, you know, this is an important part...

Well it is, because uh, before I actually got into this game, I was really into drugs, and addicted to a lot of bad drugs, and I went to jail a couple of times. And then, right around when I found this game I started really trying to clean up and sober up. I felt at the time, and I still do, that this game has kinda helped me. Cause it just gave me another

addiction to like, fill the void, you know. And that's what they teach ya, trying to get clean, is to uh, just find another addiction to replace it with, for the time being.

Is that what you set out to do, then? EQ is gonna be my new thing?

No, not at all, it just kinda became that. Cause I'm really into computers and video games, and how they work, and just the, I guess, the evolution of them from when they first started to where they're going. And this game at the time was like, the cream of the crop of gaming. Besides first person shooters, you know, Quake and stuff like that. This was really the first really online, virtual world.

So, going back to when you first decided to get clean – was it something that you talked to people in the game about?

Oh no. actually, I acutally did, at one point, cause I met some kid in the game who just happened to, I was grouping with, and he just happened to say like, I'm going to rehab today or this week, so I'm not gonna be – he was in my – I was in another guild before and he was in my guild at the time. And he was like, "you're probably not going to be seeing me for a couple of weeks cause I'm going into rehab." And I was like oh, what are you going for, blah blah blah. You know, it was a similar situation. I just told him about what happened to me and how EQ has, I don't think of it as like saved me or anything, but just helped me. It calms me down kind of, you know, cause I can get really...I don't know what's the word, but it just calms me down. Like, mellows me out. I can get figety and then my minds starts wandering – like I've always got to be constantly doing something. Like, I can't just sit there and watch tv. It gets to the point where it's just not enough to keep me occupied, but this game is. That's what I like about it.

So, with this guy that you were talking with it sounds like you weren't so much getting support, or working with the addiction...

No I was acutally trying to help him. Cause he was, at that time I had been like a year or two or three maybe, like playing the game and clean. And he was just starting to, like, try and get clean. I haven't seen him since, though. If you're wondering, like after that I don't know what happened to him

...don't know what became of him.

Yeah. No, I just told him my situation. And that's another thing about the game is like, even though it's just a computer screen, there's acutally real people behind it. You know, the pixels and stuff like that.

Hm, I don't know where to go next, there are so many interesting things to talk about.

(laughs) well it's a really – I don't know, it's a very interesting game. A lot of people have done studies on it. I don't know if you're familiar with the one, um, about the guy did a study of the whole economy of Everquest. And I mean, just the potential of like, you know what was happening within the game and the outcome, and how people or why people can sit there for 12, 14, 15 hours at one time and just keep going. Like, I'll log in this morning when I go home, and uh, for a couple hours, whatever, and I'll go to bed, cause I gotta work tonight. And, I'll get up and log back in, after like, whatever, 8-9 hours of sleep, and the same people will be logged in at the same spot doing the same thing. (laughs) so there's definitely a pull. It's definitely some type of addiction to it.

How do you think, like, getting back to your arguments with your girlfriend, and you say there are worse things you could do, if you were still doing drugs or drinking that would probably also cause rifts in the relationship.

Yeah

But, how does EQ work differently?

Um, as far as having a relationship with her?

And how it impacts your relationship...

Um, hm. Well, it gets to a point where I know that she really wants me to get off and I'll get off. You know, it's not like, to a point where I can't stop myself. You know, and she knows every Saturday and Sunday that's what I'll be doing, barring a few weekends that we make plans to go do something. So that kind of keeps the balance there too. But uh, she kind of has come to accept it though, now. I'm actually trying to teach her how to play, but she refuses to.

She doesn't want to get into it?

No, I don't think so. Well, maybe, you know, if I show her, you know, you can do this or this, but she's not to computer savvy.

But you haven't given up hope, it sounds like?

No, uh, she like, you know, like Nintendo and stuff like that where we can play together, but uh, like my computer now is dying, so I plan on getting another one, very soon, so I'll have two. You know, I could probably set them up next to each other, that way we could play together. Otherwise it's like, I'm doing my thing and she's off doing her thing and she feels like, I guess because of the game it's like, you know, I'm in the room, and I'm there with her, but I'm not really there, you know? There's been times when she has like, asked me something and I just did not hear it. Or she'll be like as far away from – we are, and she'll be like, “hey, could you go get the mail?” or whatever, and I'll just...

It doesn't register

Yeah. (laugh) I'm so into the game. Or she's like “log off now, or I'm leaving.” And, you know, how it is, you can't just like hit the power button and you're off, you've gotta like tell everybody “alright I'm leaving,” find a replacement for the group you're in or whatever, get to a safe spot, so it takes a good like, 5-10 minutes to get out of the game. And she doesn't understand that, so, that's, you know, she's learning but...

So, getting back to this weekend, walk me through her trying to get your attention and eventually getting you to log off.

Um...

How does that happen? Or how does it start?

Hm... it usually starts with like, dinner. You know, like getting something to eat. And she'll be like, “I'm hungry.” And she doesn't cook at all, and I used to be a chef, so I cook a lot, or I'll order, you know. And she'll be like “I'm hungry.” And I'll be like, “alright, give me a couple of minutes.” An hour will go by (laughs). And then she'll be like, you know, “let's eat.” Like, more words than that, but it boils down to that, and uh, and then I'll be like “alright alright, a couple more minutes.” And then she really starts to get mad, like “can't you turn away from that game for three seconds?” and then she'll come over, and I'll be like, in the middle of a raid with my guild. And uh, we're kind of like a higher end guild, we're doing the new expansion that's out right now, and so every little bit kind of counts, cause they're really tough hard mobs. And I don't know if you know the way the game is designed, but if you're not there for the kill, then you don't get

flagged to move on to the next area, so it's kinda like, you wanna be there, otherwise you'll miss out and you won't be at the next raid because you don't have the flag. So, she'll like, come swivel my chair around (demonstrates swiveling motion) and, that's what I mean by she tries to like, grab my attention. And it just gets to the point where like, it gets very annoying and I'll be like, I might just say like "look! Give me a minute, let me finish this." And then she gets upset and goes into her room. And I'll finally get off and be like "okay, what do you want to eat?" and she won't talk to me or whatever, but then I'll just start cooking and she'll come out.

So what's going on for you when she first starts saying "I'm hungry"? you're still...

Well I acknowledge it, and I tell her – uh, she's very dependent, which really bugs me. I say "fine, pick up the phone and order something, you know, and I'll get it when it comes." Or I'll say "what do you want to eat?" she won't say anything. She'll just be like, "I'm hungry" and I'll be like "well, what do you want?" Or like, "well, order something, get it delivered" or whatever, I'll go get it. And she'll be like, but she can't make a choice of what she wants to order. Like, it's gotta be...and I guess, maybe that's her way of like, you know, making me to like, think outside of the game, about food or whatever. To make me make the choice so I turn away from the game or something.

To distract you.

Ah, yeah. Because, it's not like um, it's hard to multitask when you're playing this game. It's hard to like, have a conversation with someone and play the game, unless you're kinda just like, half-assed playing the game. Which, in some cases you can, in most of the cases you can't. so, I don't know. It's definitely a little rift of contention there between us. And also people in my guild that I have met, uh, they say the same thing. Unless their spouse plays, or accepts is, or whatever, or has something for them to do at the time, like go out with a friend or something, then there's always that little rift. Like one guy in my guild has just recently got divorced because of it. He's like, "we're on the verge of divorce, and I have a chance to save it if I quit this game, so." And like, he's got a family, you know, he's got kids and stuff, but there's some guys that just say "the hell with it," you know, just keep playing. Because it's just, you know, they, I guess, it's part of them. Plus you've invested so much time into it. There's a big hook there, and they know it, you know, the gaming companies, the know it, so they just keep you there. It's kind of like gambling. I guess once you start and get into it, it just pulls you out of reality. And maybe for a lot of people, reality isn't, you know, a good place, or a place they really thought they would be. You know? So this kinda helps them I guess.

I'm wondering about how much, for the people you play with, reality comes into the game? You're talking about their relationships being on the rocks and such. Is that something that you talk about with your friends or people in your guild very much?

Um, it's really like a touchy subject because unless you really know the person, it's like, a lot of people in the guild have met other people in the guild in real life. Just because they've been in the guild, so maybe yeah, they do talk about that.

Have you met other people in the guild?

Yeah, I actually went to Oregon this summer. Not to actually meet someone, but me and my friend just took a ride out, see a couple of concerts, and I posted on the message board for the guild that I was gonna be going away for a few weeks to Oregon, does anybody

live out there, have a good place? You know, a beach or whatever, give me like, an idea of what I can do, or a club to go to at night, in Portland. And this other, this one kid, said “yeah, I live right in Portland, I’ll meet you and show you around.” Which we did, really cool kid, really nice guy, my age. But, and because of that, we talk, you know, relationship-wise. But he’s, I guess he’s not as heavily into the game, and he’ll be like, he’ll miss a raid to go out with his girlfriend of whatever. But other times he’ll be like “my girl’s yelling at me, I don’t know what to do – she wants me to get off this stupid game and...” but, everybody I talk to, they’re like, I can’t believe I’m still playing this game after five years. But it’s not the game itself, it’s just the people that you meet within the game.

Besides this kid from Oregon, who are the people who have kept you coming back to the game? You mentioned your brother...

Um, yeah. Well, when I log in in the morning, like I get out of work at 8, and I’ll go home, and just to like wind down from work and stuff I’ll log in and play. And that’s when my girlfriend’s at work, so you know, I don’t have to worry about that. (laughs) and I usually – see our guild is like, an east coast guild, where everybody works during the day, and they get out of work at 5 or 6, and start raiding at 7 at night. So, in the morning, there’s some people from Australia and Europe, are in the guild. I don’t know how the juggle their time like that. And there’s only like a handful, like 6 or 7 or 8, so when I log in it’s usually the same people that I play with. And then at night when I log in, there’s probably like 70, 60-70 people. So it’s kinda hard to like, get to know everybody. And everybody in the guild has certain people they hang – there’s like cliques in the guild, you know? So I would say logging in the morning, being able to see the same people and, you know, like “how was work?” They know I work at night and this and that. I mean we chat, not just about the game, but like, “what do you do?” “Oh I do this.” Or, you know, so you definitely form a relationship there, even though you don’t meet them face to face or talk to them on the phone or anything. You know, if I didn’t log in – I’ll go home and I’ll log in and they’ll be like “oh, where were you? We were waiting for you.” Because they know I log in every day at like 8:30. So it’s just, you know, it’s nice to have that, I think.

Familiar people around at the same time every day?

Yeah, and you know, if something’s going on, in their life, they’ll like – you know, you don’t go out right and ask them, but eventually they’ll talk about it. Like, um, like that kid who up and quit because of divorce. And he posted that, like everybody in the guild was like, “oh, go do what you’ve gotta do.” You know, real life comes first, this and that. But it’s funny how people, like, differentiate this between like real life and...fantasy land or whatever they wanna call it. But it’s funny how like someone is always gonna quit the guild and the game, they’ll be like “Oh, real life comes first.” Like, you know, this isn’t real life or something. It’s like, it’s funny how people, like separate the two. You know, I never actually, like, really thought about it, but. They don’t consider this I guess real life or something. And in which case it isn’t, but you know, they’re really sitting there behind the computer screen. It’s real life with me when I go home and do that. (laughs) But, it’s funny just to see, like, grown people say that. Like, oh real life comes first, play time is you know, I don’t know, it’s weird, but I guess that’s what keeps me going back, is seeing the same people. And just having that relationship with them. I

guess it's just like a modern-day pen pal type of thing. Like some people would look forward to getting a letter every week, or whatever.

And that distinction seems funny because you wouldn't say, this letter isn't real life.

Yeah. Exactly, you know what I mean? Like, tv isn't real life, or like a hobby isn't. I just consider it a hobby.

Is it different talking with, like these people from Australia that you see every day, is it different talking with them versus talking with somebody face to face, like a friend?

Uh, actually it's interesting you bring that up because there's a topic on one of the message boards I go to about that. And um, not so much about in the game but on the message board. Cause people are saying a lot of things that they wouldn't really say to people in real life, and even in the guild, like, people get really mad at someone for doing something within the game, that effects their character in the game, which in turn effects them and their time, but then, after a while, they'll be like, "oh I sometimes get too carried away. I don't realize, you know, that there's real people behind the characters." And like I've seen people get in real big fights about stuff. And uh, you know, the person doing most of the yelling is usually someone who's very much into the game. Like, whenever you log in, or I log in, they're always there. And um, usually when someone's that hard into the game, then little things that effect them that you do will really piss them off big time. And uh, then you just gotta tell them, "you don't know me, really. You don't really know me. Would you say this to my face if you met me? I'm not some 13 year old kid." You know? And me and a friend were just talking about that the other day, because I guess he stepped on someone's toes, similar to that, and the kid just went off on him, like big time. And he was telling me that he was like telling this kid to, you know, just chill out, step back. You don't know me. I'm a construction worker, 30 year old guy, and you're just a little college kid that has too much time on your hands and is always playing (laughs) the game, so just relax, chill out, log out, take a walk or something. But yeah, a lot of people do get carried away, because they do have that safety net of being in their comforts of their own home, they can go off, and not have any consequences...like lasting consequences. Like if you did that to your boss or something, something would happen. Or your parents or your girlfriend. But in the game, you can get away with it, so a lot of people...

They forgive you?

Um, people do forgive, but once you step over that line, you're always known as someone that...that's just – to stay away from. You know, childish. And there's a lot of people like that in the game. You just know – they form a reputation for themselves. That you just know not to group with them, or just, they gotta have control. And maybe they don't have control in their own lives, so in the game, they like, you know, they wanna enforce and control. Or supposed control over you. You know, whatever, I don't care.

So they're kind of, is there a consequence, if you...

Oh yeah, yeah – you get black-labeled on the server, and nobody will group with you. A lot of servers have their own message board, which I'm sure you know of, and uh, if you're an asshole then they'll just outright talk about you on the board. And then, say "soandso did this and this and this." And then another person who had maybe a similar

experience will post “hey, they did that to me too.” And then sooner or later you’ve got 10 or 15 people. So then you know that this person is not someone that you really wanna hang around with or associate with, or...whatever. And because of that a lot of people have moved servers or changed their name, or ebayed. You know, and tried to start a new character. But their personality, you can always tell, it’s the same person. Which is interesting in a game, like, even though you don’t really know the person or see them or recognize them, you can always tell by their personality who they are – or how certain things will make them flip out and they’ll just go off. I mean, you can tell, you know.

Have you ever spotted somebody like that?

Oh yeah, yup.

How’d it happen? How did you figure out?

Um, let me think...well, it’s usually in the form of bad playing. Like if someone is not good at their class, then other people will try and offer them help or tell them, “you’re just not good.” You know, “try another class.” And then, the person that you tell that to doesn’t like it, and they flip out and say “who are you to tell me how to play my class..” and they get offended. Which, you know, is right, but most people are like “hey, thanks, for letting me” you know, “helping me out” without taking offense to it. Cause it’s not like reprimanding. You’re just offering them pointers, so they can be better, cause if they don’t it’s just a waste of your time to play with them. Because they get your character killed. It’s just a waste of time to play with them (laughs). So you try to help them out so it’s not wasting your time. And then uh, sooner or later they’re just known as just a bad shaman, or whatever. There’s one character that was like that, and uh, I guess he just ran with that reputation after a while, and like would just be a total dick to everybody. And uh, would like loot anything and everything and steal every thing, up and sell his character, get whatever, like \$100 on ebay for it, and then start a new character. And then you wouldn’t know for a while who it was, until they reached the same play level of levels you are at, and then once they did, you could tell that this person doesn’t know how to play their class. And if you try to offer them help, they get really offended, and they just do the same behavior. It’s like people follow the same patterns and behavior and you can recognize them. Some people can, some people can’t. some people are better at recognizing it than others. Uh, like this one person swore up and down that this guy who ebayed was this new character on the server. Everybody was like “no, no, no, this guy’s so chill, and he’s really nice, and he knows how to play his class.” And it turns out that it was him. They just recognized it really fast that it was him. Unless he knew him in real life, I don’t know, but, there’s some people that really – they’re good at spotting that.

So it sounds like, on the one hand, if people are behaving differently online than they would in real life, it has to do with sort of, like you talk about trying to exert control and saying things that are rude or mean that you wouldn’t say to somebody’s face...

Um hm

I’m wondering if you have ever personally said something that you...

No, I’m definitely conscious of that. Cause I knew from the very beginning that (sound from outside) oh I thought they were buzzing us to tell us it was time...

(laugh) to get out!

I don't know. No, I knew from the very beginning that like, mainly all you have in this game is your reputation. And if you ruin that within the game, you might quit or change servers or whatever. So I was always really helpful and careful like if someone new comes into the game and they're asking questions, like if they can have, whatever, money, platinum, extra loot or whatever, I always try and help them out. And then they remember me, remember you as a helpful person. Um, I guess the only time I ever really went off was because I was in this guild, and all the leaders of the guild were morons. And they would pretty much spaz out if like, we lost against, like a dragon or whatever we were going up against. Um, they would spaz out, like yell at everybody, like "what the hell, you can't do this, you can't do that right. You're all a bunch of idiots" and this and that. And I don't know, maybe they were trying to motivate us, or whatever, but they did it too often, and like everybody like, kinda like, in the separate groups that we were in, you have group chat and raid chat, and uh guild chat. So we would be in the group and we would be like, "they do this way too much. They take this game way too seriously." You know, this and that, and uh, and they just pretty much ran the guild into the ground because of their attitude to us. And we were just, whatever, just people. We didn't care whether we won or lost against something. It was just, you know, something to do for the night. And uh, so they just went off too much, so finally I just said in guild, you know I just called them on it. And they kicked me out of the guild (laughs). And everybody was like, "I've been wanting to" all the other people in the guild were like "I've been wanting to say that for so long, I'm glad you did." And this and that. And maybe like a week later the guild fell apart. Because I mean, after that, people started speaking up. And then they tried, I mean, I guess the whole idea was like to set up a guild and try and get loot for them pretty much. Like, I was like, a very early, like that was one of my first guilds, like raiding guilds. So, I really didn't understand the whole guild concept.

It that similar to the way you would be, like, dealing with somebody face to face, like at work, or friends, if someone was being difficult, you would speak up for yourself?

Oh yeah. I did last night at work. (laughs)

What happened?

Well, this lady was messing around with the copiers. It was jamming, so she was opening up the drawers, pulling them out, this and that. Pretty much breaking the machine, and they're brand new. So I was like, you can't do that, you know. I don't go, do you have someone come into your place of business and start messing around with whatever it is that you're doing? You know, if you have a problem, just come over and ask me to come fix it. Well, she was like, "well if you jerks came over and offered me help, this and that, a little while ago I wouldn't have to be doing this, and blah blah blah." And I was like "look, you just don't do that. I'm here now, I'll help you now." "why do you still work on, I used to sell Xerox copiers so I know what I'm doing" and she really didn't. and I told her "look, you keep doing it I'm going to have to ask you to leave." She kept doing it and I was like "can you leave?" and she was like "no, I will not." So I let the other girl deal with her, (laughs) cause I couldn't deal with her. But yeah, that's generally how I am in life. If something's not right, then, you know, I'll speak up about it. Usually. In game I have a little more, uh, I don't know, what's the word for it, a little more guts to do it because there's less consequences involved. But everybody the guild I'm in now,

which I've been in for the last two years, is they're all like mature people, there's no loudmouth kids or anything like that. You know, so, it's pretty relaxed in there. That's the way I like it. I mean, if everybody in game was like that, I probably would've quit, a long time ago. Just because, it's just not worth my time to log in and get stressed out over somebody else in game.

So you mentioned a while back that you thought about deleting your character a couple of times, and quitting...

Well, I guess, a lot of people once they reach a certain point, like if they quit and they don't delete – it's kind of like quitting smoking, if you quit cold turkey. You rip the band-aid right off, in one rip (laughs) you know? Like don't do it too slowly. So it's the same principle I guess, like don't, if you're really serious about quitting, a lot of people say delete your character, uninstall all the files, break your CDs so you can't install them again, this and that. Um, yup.

When have you thought about doing all that stuff?

Um, I never really went that far. Like I entertained the thought of like selling my character on ebay, but then I was like, no that would be kind of like a slap in the face of all the time that I put into it. And the people that helped me get all the stuff for him. So, and then there were times when I was just like, summertime is here, and I don't wanna just like waste another summer. Not so much waste, but you know, I wanna do something else. And, so I would for a week or two, and then I'd find myself going back to it more and more – slowly. And then uh, then like I was thinking about it one day – I wonder why I can't just quit this game, just like up and quit? I suppose I could if I really wanted to, but every time that I really tried, I'd do it for a little while and then kind of go back to it. So then I was like, well, maybe it's because uh, you know, I still have that, the temptation because the character is still there. You know, it's not not there, it's not deleted or anything. And I guess it almost goes back to when I was doing drugs – if you quit, you've gotta remove all, you know, paraphernalia or whatever from your house or apartment. Because it could be a trigger, like if you see something like that, then, you know, it gets you in that mindframe. I mean, I almost equate it, like, an addiction is an addiction, and I have an addictive personality, so I kind of see this as an addiction. And I also play guitar, and I see that as an addiction because sometimes I do that too much. So, but I'm aware of it, though, I'm not like a...like, I'm not like not aware of it, I'm not oblivious to the fact that I have an addictive personality. And my girlfriend knows that, so she knows that, like I said before I could be doing a lot of worse things with my time. Like a lot of my friends they don't understand how I could spend so much time playing a game. And, well A. who are you to tell me what I can do with my time and B. what do you do every weekend? Well, we go out to a bar and drink. And how much money do you spend? Oh, 60-70 dollars. And I'm just like, yeah? Well I spend 12 dollars a month. And, have a lot more fun playing that than I would at the bar anyway. So.

So it's still a kind of an addiction, but a less damaging one?

Yeah. Yup, and you know, it's definitely a less damaging one. Definitely. As far as me, you know, my health, and stuff like that – legal consequences (laughs).

The only thing I can think of that you've mentioned about the way it negatively effects your life is with your girlfriend.

Well, yeah. It definitely does. Unless you're like a single guy or girl, and you have loads of time on your hands, it can get out of control, very fast. I'm guilty of calling in sick to

work so I can stay home and play. This game has a – it almost takes – for some people it takes control over their lives. Just because it's such a fun game. But it does have it's ups and downs, though. Like anything I guess you could say.

What are the ups and downs?

Well like you said, it has an effect on the relationship. I guess, well I guess it could effect your health in a way, if you're not active. You're just sitting in a chair, you don't eat. Some people have actually killed themselves over the game.

Do you feel that it's affected your health?

Sometimes I do. Cause I've put on some weight. But I also attribute that to I'm getting old, you know? (laughs) I'm not a teenager no more, so....you know how you just age. But yeah, I guess it could. I could be more active. Especially on the weekends. I kinda try, lately, to make a conscious effort to balance my time. There was a point in time where I thought if I wasn't at a raid or something that it would effect the raid or I wouldn't help, you know, I'd be letting people down if I wasn't there. I come to realize that's not the case. If I don't log in, the Everquest world ain't gonna stop. (laughs) come to a standstill. So, I come to a point where I can just not log in, and just hang out with her. So I realized that. Even though there's still real people behind the game, but I don't really know them. My girlfriend, like she's, she's something that's there, like a real person. So she should demand more of my attention than the acutal game or people I don't even really know. But I've known longer, you know, through the game, but I don't really know them. Like, face to face.

What is really knowing someone?

Um, that's a good question. I guess before this game I would say to really know someone is to meet them, hang out with them, maybe see if you click or whatever. But I guess with the internet world, with my brother meeting his girlfriend of like 3 years now in the game, I guess it's a moot point if you can't see them or if you can see them. But I guess you could say I really don't know – like a lot of the people I don't know what they do, on their off time, or what they were like when they were younger, in the past, or their dreams or aspirations. I uh, with her I do. You know that. And I mean in the game it's like, superficial, like, when you're with someone and you click, you get that good feeling – in reality. Kinda like, a natural high, almost. But in the game, it's like a superficial high. It's not like the high you get when you see someone that you really like, your heart starts pounding and you get all sweaty. It can get like that on raids, when like, everything comes together. But it's like a short-lived superficial thing. And I guess like that physiological part of the game, when you get like that, it – I guess that adrenaline rush of it is very addicting. Like a lot of people are adrenaline junkies, like they'll go bungee jumping and all that. You know, like jump out of airplanes, parachute, sky diving. Cause they're addicted to that rush. Well it's the same thing within the game, like, you got 50 people working together to kill one thing. It's like, woah! (laughs) just how it all comes together.

(unintelligable)

yeah, yeah. And uh, that's a good rush. But in real life, it's a different one. More real. I think. You can share it with someone real. But even though people in the game, on the other side of the computer are real, you don't get to see their faces and their expressions. I mean, you can imagine it, they're typing. Which, years ago you probably never could do it. Before the influx of online gaming and stuff like that. But the evolution of it is

really amazing, you know? That this game could still be going, after all this time. 10 years, 15 years it still could be.

It interests a lot of people.

Um hm.

I'm thinking about, you mentioned the suicide case – have you ever noticed your mood being effected by Everquest?

Um, when I'm trying to lead a raid or something and uh, and someone thinks they can do it better, and they step on your toes, and keep trying, you know like, I got like 18, 20 guys. Like okay, for example you know they've got these new epic quests? This new expansion?

Um hm

There's a little short, like small raids you gotta do, with like 18-20 people, which doesn't take a guild to do. But usually I try to gather some people I know and try and, you know, lead them to kill this thing, and someone else won't like, you know, listen, really. And then will rush in and get us all killed. Or like, then people are like, "oh, well, I've gotta go." And that kinda gets me upset, because it's like, you know, if they just took the time, and didn't rush in, thinking they could do it, and it's just a waste of time. And that's what gets me upset. You know, I took the time to get everyone here, did all the research on it. They didn't. they're trying to think they can do a better way when they don't know the encounter. And then when they get us killed you just like, I've come to points where I just want to take my mouse and like, smash it, like "uuugh!" My keyboard, like, "uugh!"

Frustrated.

Yup, yup.

What about times when you've felt good?

Oh yeah. I mean, when it all comes together. And everybody's like "yeah! Yeah!" typing "yeah!" or "woot!" or something. So everybody really really, they're all like "congratulations!" and this and that. And it's just, you know, feel good that you can lead that many people. I think in the beginning, this game wouldn't be as popular as it was if Everquest didn't force people to group – together in groups and work together. Cause we can take 50 people, and they won't be able to beat a certain encounter, and they won't know what they're doing. And they just go at it. It actually takes thinking and calculation, and doing the right things at the right time. Or, one small mistake could ruin everything. Once everything comes together it's a really really good feeling.

It sounds like you feel proud.

Oh yeah. You feel real proud of the guild, then you take a screenshot and post it on the website. I mean, out of all the servers, there's probably like, what, 35 servers? Everybody kinda like, tracks who's the top guild of all the servers and what they're doing. And there's kinda like a little prestige that goes with it, in the online world. A couple people that play, like the leaders of really popular, high-end guilds, that do things first, have really gotten like, prestige. They've gotten jobs out of it – Sony has asked them to work for them. Or to like, beta-test some of the new stuff. So yeah there's definitely a good pride feeling, a prestige that goes with it.

Do you ever hope that you'll get something like a job out of it?

Um, sometimes, but I probably know that will never happen. Cause I'm not vocal enough. Like the people that have are really vocal, they like lead their own guilds and

post like, if they're the first guild to do a new encounter they'll, you know, like kinda do a bug report on it, and say "this needs to be fixed, this..." you know? And they have really good ideas, you know like this encounter could be so much better if you just did this, this and this. And then a week later that's exactly what Sony does. Because half the time they don't even know what they're doing. They just kind of like, come up with a concept and hope it works. Until they actually get so many people going at it, you realize, well I never expected this to happen. And then these people will get vocal about it, and say this has gotta be fixed, or this is good, this isn't. and then they just recognize that talent. And uh, some people maybe because they know how computers work and programming, that they know certain constraints of what they can and can't do, which I really don't. I just know if it's fun or not (laugh). Or it you can kill it or not. But, uh, no, I probably – I would have good ideas. I'd probably be a good concept person, but as far as program and code, I have no idea how to get it to work. I know it's all ones and zeroes, that's about it.

In some order.

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